Table of Contents

1. Allegiances
2. Prologue
3. Chapter 1
4. Chapter 2
5. Chapter 3
6. Chapter 4
7. Chapter 5
8. Chapter 6
9. Allegiance Update 1
10. Chapter 7
11. Chapter 8
12. Chapter 9
13. Chapter 10
14. Chapter 11
15. Chapter 12
16. Chapter 13
17. Chapter 14
18. Allegiance Update #2
19. Chapter 15
20. Chapter 16
21. Allegiance Update #3
22. Chapter 17
23. Chapter 18
24. Chapter 19
25. Chapter 20
26. Allegiance Update #4
27. Chapter 21
28. Chapter 22
29. Chapter 23
30. Allegiance Update #5
31. Chapter 24
32. Chapter 25
33. Chapter 26
34. Chapter 27

35. Chapter 28
36. Allegiance Update #6 + Family Tree
37. Chapter 29
38. Chapter 30
39. Chapter 31
40. Chapter 32
41. Final Allegiances + Family Tree
42. SOB on Redbubble
43. Shadows of Blood on Twitter

Allegiances

Shadowclan

Leader: Depthstar - Very dark blue-gray tom with a lighter front left paw, dark blue eyes.

Deputy: Cobratail - Mottled dark red and black tabby tom with amber eyes.

Medicine Cat: Hawkfeather - Spotted brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Dewstorm

Warriors

Crowmask - Black tom with amber eyes.

Greenpine - Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Ashcloud - Dark gray and white tom with pale green eyes.

Maplefur - Creamy tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Rosebreeze - Creamy ginger tabby she-cat with pale amber eyes.

Milkblaze - White tom with creamy points, pale yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Boost

Cougarfoot - Golden brown tom with a white muzzle, black ear tips and tail tip, amber eyes.

Apprentice, Mottledpaw

Cliffshade - Dark brown and gray tom with a white underbelly,

yellow eyes.

Rainheart - Light gray tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Bloomfire - Orange she-cat with white paws, muzzle, and chin, dark ginger ears.

Flameheart - Ginger tabby tom with green eyes.

Apprentice, Stripedpaw

Copperstripe - Dark golden ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Song

Timberstorm - Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Blackstorm - Black tom with yellow eyes.

Brownstripe - Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Foxshadow - Black and very dark ginger tom with a bushy tail, dark amber eyes.

Apprentices

Dewstorm - Spotted gray tom with yellow eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Stripedpaw - Tortoiseshell tom with white paws, chest, and muzzle, black mark on his nose, blue eyes.

Mottledpaw - Mottled brown tom with amber eyes.

Boost - Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. Former loner.

Song - White she-cat with light blue eyes. Former loner.

Queens

Poppywing - Light red-brown tabby she-cat with light blue eyes. (expecting Rainheart's kits)

Poisonedsap - Dark golden brown she-cat with dark brown muzzle, throat, nose blaze, black chin, ears, paws, and tail tip, amber eyes. (Mother of Maplefur's kits:

Stonekit - White tom with jet black legs, yellow eyes.

Swiftkit - Black and white tom with blue eyes.)

Diamondrain - Silver gray she-cat with darker spots, paws, and ears, white chest, muzzle, and chin, light blue eyes. (expecting Crowmask's kits)

Elders

Buzzardglare- Dark brown tabby tom with one blind eye, yellow eyes.

Foxshine - Ginger she-cat with yellow eyes.

Carrottail - Orange tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Bluerain - Light blue gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes.

_____

Thunderclan

Leader: Strawberrystar - Speckled reddish-ginger and cream she-cat with amber eyes.

Deputy: Snowfalcon - Broad shouldered white tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Darkpaw

Medicine Cat: Spicewhisker - Small black tom with a white muzzle, tail tip, and front right paw, yellow eyes.

Warriors

Broadwing - Broad shouldered dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Batpaw

Oaktuft - Brown and cream tabby tom with amber eyes.

Morningmist - Light gray tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Chillwhisker - Light gray tabby tom with light blue eyes.

Hickoryroot - Brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Cedarnose - Dark brown tabby tom with a white splashed muzzle and paws, amber eyes.

Vanillafern - Creamy colored tabby she-cat with pale yellow eyes.

Apprentices

Batpaw - Smoky black tom with gray-brown muzzle and underbelly, amber eyes.

Darkpaw - Very dark brown tom with swirled black stripes, amber eyes.

Windclan

Leader: Gladestar - Light golden yellow tabby she-cat with pale greenish yellow eyes.

Deputy: Monarchwing - Orange she-cat with black spots and ear tips, golden yellow muzzle, chin, nose blaze, chest, and tail tip, darker orange paws, yellowish green eyes.

Medicine Cat: Silverberry - Silver she-cat with a darker front left paw, tail tip, and right ear, green eyes.

Apprentice, Starpaw

Warriors

Firetail - Orange tom with a darker reddish tail and ears, amber eyes.

Jaggedear - Brown tabby tom with a torn left ear, green eyes.

Apprentice, Tornadopaw

Driftrunner - Dark golden brown tom with very thick black classic tabby stripes, muzzle, chin, ears, paws, chest, and underbelly, amber eyes.

Willowtail- Light gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

Whitehare - White tom with light green eyes.

Apprentices

Tornadopaw - Dark gray tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Starpaw - Golden yellow she-cat with a yellow tail tip and star shape on chest, yellow eyes.

Queens

Clovernose - Brown and white she-cat with green eyes.

Riverclan

Leader: Frostedstar - White tom with pale blue eyes.

Deputy: Ravenfeather - Black tom with amber eyes**.**

Medicine Cat: Otterpelt - Red-brown she-cat with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Sagepaw

Warriors

Frozenripple - Long furred silver tom with swirled white stripes, pale blue eyes.

Lemonsplash - White tom with yellow patches, yellow eyes.

Pebblestep - Mottled gray tom with white paws, pale green eyes.

Petalfin - Silver, black, dark gray, and white splashed she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentices

Sagepaw - Silver and black tabby she-cat with pale blue-green eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Skyclan

Leader: Ravenstar - Long furred black tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Sandblaze - Light golden yellow tom with light brown-ginger paws, mark on chest, ears, chin, and yellowish blaze on forehead and tail tip. Yellow eyes.

Medicine Cat: Ryeheart - Brown tabby tom with dark brown tabby legs, tail, ears, and nose blaze, creamy chin, muzzle, chest, and tail tip, amber eyes.

Warriors

Tigerleap - Dark golden brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Brackenleaf - Dark ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Apprentices

Prologue

[image]

"Great Starclan, Rainheart! Stay still for a moment!"

The gray tabby tom paused, though his paws longed to continue pacing. He fixed his yellow eyes on his sister who sat with her mate, eyes gleaming with amusement.

"I can't help it," Rainheart meowed, his heart pounding rapidly. "I'm so nervous, but excited!" He paused and turned to the nursery, poking his head in. "Hawkfeather, how is-"

"For StarClan's sake, Rainheart, keep your fur on!" Came the medicine cat's response. "You act like she's the first cat ever to kit!"

Rainheart huffed out a sigh and backed out of the den, sitting down. A moment later Hawkfeather's apprentice, Dewstorm, poked his spotted head out of the den. "Don't mind Hawkfeather," He meowed to Rainheart apologetically. "He gets cranky when he's focused. Poppywing is going to be fine."

"I know, but-"

"Bloomfire, why don't you talk to your brother?" Dewstorm purred. "If he doesn't get his mind on something else soon and stop pacing, I'm afraid his paws are going to fall off!"

Bloomfire's eyes gleamed. "Of course." She waved her tail as Dewstorm disappeared back into the den. "Rainheart, come here."

Rainheart reluctantly turned and sat by his sister. He cast a glance over his shoulder at the nursery as Poppywing let out a soft yowl.

"What has you so worried?" The orange she-cat prompted. "I've never seen you like this."

Rainheart hesitated. "I'm just worried about Poppywing," He admitted. "What if something goes wrong? Will the kits like me?"

"Rainheart-"

"Do you think I'll be a good father?" He asked anxiously.

Bloomfire's eyes softened. "Of course you will," She promised. "You're a bit young to be having kits though, aren't you?" She teased.

Rainheart let out an amused purr. "Well, you will be too," He curled his tail. "Every cat in ShadowClan has noticed you and Flameheart."

Bloomfire's eyes widened, and Flameheart gave his ginger chest a few embarrassed licks. "Oh, well," She purred. "Maybe."

Another yowl sounded from the nursery.

Rainheart's ears perked up at a delightful thought. "If you hurry up, maybe our kits will play together, and train together!"

Bloomfire and Flameheart exchanged an affectionate glance, and she wrapped her tail around her mate. "Maybe," She purred.

Suddenly, a yowl far louder than the previous ones rung out from the nursery, followed by a cry.

Rainheart spun around, bristling. "Poppywing?"

"Dewstorm, get some cobwebs!" Panic edged Hawkfeather's voice. "Hurry!"

Rainheart shot over to the den, poking his head in as Dewstorm rapidly clawed up a wad of cobwebs. "What's going on?"

"Rainheart, get out!" Hawkfeather ordered. He was crouched by Poppywing, sniffing her and pawing her red-brown belly. "Now!"

"Why?" His heart sprinted as he struggled to see his mate behind the medicine cat's tabby body. "Is she okay?"

No one answered him. Dewstorm, who was usually gentler than any cat, shouldered Rainheart out of the den. "Stay out of our way!" He urged, his eyes lit with alarm. "We need room to work. We'll save

her."

"Save her?" Rainheart exclaimed, his head spinning. "Save her? What's wrong? Poppywing!"

He tried to push into the den, but Dewstorm shoved him back. "Please, stay out of the way!"

Rainheart snarled and unsheathed his claws, ready to lash out at the tom.

"Rainheart!"

He felt paws grasp his hindquarters and pull him backwards. He stumbled back and spun to face his sister's alarmed face.

Rainheart felt blind with terror, his paws trembling. "Something's wrong! I have to be there!" He turned toward the den again, but Bloomfire wrapped her tail around him. "It's alright!" She soothed. "Hawkfeather and Dewstorm will take care of everything. It's going to be okay." She gently lapped at her brother's fur, but he didn't relax. He kept staring at the nursery anxiously. *Oh, StarClan, let Poppywing be okay!*

***

Poppywing raised her head, feeling dizzy as she tried to take in her surroundings. She could just make out the blurred shapes of Hawkfeather and Dewstorm beside her. She felt wet, and glanced down to see blood pooling out of her, soaking the moss beneath her with the crimson liquid. Pain pulsed through her belly.

"What's wrong?" She whimpered as Dewstorm pawed cobwebs at her, but the bleeding did not seem to slow. "Where's Rainheart?"

"He's outside," Dewstorm told her gently. "Don't worry, you're going to be fine."

"StarClan willing," Hawkfeather muttered under his breath.

Poppywing tried to peer out of the den to catch a glimpse her mate. "I want Rainheart here!"

Dewstorm hesitated and looked at his mentor, who shook his head. "He's only going to panic and get in the way."

The spotted tom gave Hawkfeather a long look. "The bleeding isn't stopping."

Hawkfeather shot him a look. "What are you saying?" He growled.

"I'm saying we should let Rainheart see her before-"

"No!" Hawkfeather snarled, and Dewstorm flinched. "How can you give up so easily? A medicine cat does not give up!"

Dewstorm lashed his tail. "You think this is easy for me?" He snapped, his eyes lighting with defense. "There's nothing we can do. She's in the paws of StarClan now, and if she is to join them, Rainheart deserves to see her one last time."

Poppywing could hardly believe her ears. *I'm going to die...* A spasm of pain pulsed through her, and she let out a quiet cry, too weak to yowl now. She rested her head on the moss, flanks heaving as she breathed.

Hawkfeather and Dewstorm stood, ears flattened, tails lashing as they stared at each other through narrowed eyes. After a moment, Hawkfeather looked outside of the den. "Rainheart,"

Rainheart almost immediately bolted into the den, letting out a horrified cry as he saw Poppywing's condition. "No!" He shoved the medicine cats aside and crouched beside her, lapping at her cheek. "Stay with me!"

Poppywing's eyes parted slightly, trying to focus on him. "I'm sorry..." She rasped. "Goodbye...."

"No!" Rainheart begged. "Stay with me!" He pressed his muzzle into her red fur. "Poppywing!"

She didn't respond, and her flanks stopped heaving.

"Poppywing?" Rainheart whimpered.

Dewstorm hesitantly padded over and rested his paw on her flank. "I'm sorry," He murmured.

Rainheart let out a long wail, burying his face into his mate's fur.

It was very quiet now.

[image]

She can't be gone...! She can't...! He thought desperately as he drank in the scent of his mate, but the stench of blood poisoned it.

Hawkfeather turned away. "I'll tell the clan," He murmured.

Rainheart stood, fury and hatred for the medicine cat blazing through him. "You call yourself a medicine cat?" He snarled, his paws trembling under him. "You're supposed to save cats!"

Hawkfeather met Rainheart's gaze solemnly. "Medicine cats can not always save their clanmates," He meowed quietly. "Sometimes we have no choice but to accept the fate StarClan has laid down."

"Fate?" Rainheart echoed angrily. "Fate? This was not fate! She wasn't supposed to die!" He stepped toward Hawkfeather, who backed up warily. "She was supposed to have my kits! We were supposed to name them together, and raise them together!"

"Rainheart, come here," Dewstorm urged quietly. "I'll get you some thyme."

He ignored the medicine cat, lashing his tail as he glared at Hawkfeather. "You killed her!" He snarled.

Hawkfeather looked uneasy now as he backed up against the wall of the den. "We did everything we could, Rainheart."

Rainheart bared his teeth and crouched, unsheathing his claws, and Hawkfeather tensed, almost certain that the tabby warrior was going to attack.

But after a moment, Rainheart spun and dashed out of the den.

***

Bloomfire and Flameheart sat together, looking at the nursery anxiously. Beyond them most of the clan had gathered, murmuring to each other and casting anxious glances at the nursery.

"Do you think she's alright?"

"I don't hear anything."

"I haven't seen Rainheart."

Suddenly, Rainheart burst out of the den.

"Rainheart!" Bloomfire leaped to her paws. "What-"

Her brother shot past her without saying a word, thrusting his way through his startled clanmates and exiting the camp.

The clan began murmuring anxiously, some letting out wails of grief.

Bloomfire looked at the nursery anxiously, almost certain of what happened. She stepped toward the den, then hesitated, looking back at the camp exit where Rainheart had pelted through. *He needs some time.* She thought. She sighed and padded into the den, preparing herself for the worst.

Her heart lurched.

Poppywing lay motionless, a pool of blood under her. The moss near her hindquarters glistened with crimson.

Hawkfeather and Dewstorm spoke quietly to each other.

"Oh, no..." She whispered.

Dewstorm looked back at the orange she-cat. "Where did Rainheart go?"

"He... he left the camp." Bloomfire gazed at Poppywing's body sadly. "I think he needs some time alone." She slowly sat with the

medicine cats. "The kits...?"

"None came," Hawkfeather said quietly.

It was very quiet. Bloomfire stared at the bloody moss under Poppywing. A scrap of moss shifted. She blinked. Had she imagined it? The bloody moss shifted again and made a squeak.

"Look!" She exclaimed, hope filling her heart. *Could it be?* The medicine cats looked at her in bewilderment as she carefully pawed at the moss. It cried again, and she moved the scrap closer to her to find that it wasn't a scrap of moss at all.

It was a tiny kit, soaked in blood. He let out tiny squeaks, parting his tiny jaws to reveal sharp little white teeth.

"Great StarClan!" Dewstorm gasped and hurried to Bloomfire's side. "A kit!"

Bloomfire held the kit close with one paw, rapidly lapping at its fur. Dewstorm crouched and joined in, and together they cleaned the kit of blood.

Hawkfeather stared at the kit, his yellow eyes widening. "That kit was born in blood," He whispered. "It's an omen. He will destroy our clan."

Dewstorm raised his head, shooting his mentor a bewildered glance. "Don't be ridiculous!" He exclaimed. "If anything, it's a good sign. This is a miracle."

"No," Hawkfeather growled. "That kit is trouble."

"Enough, Hawkfeather," Dewstorm growled as Bloomfire studied the kit. It was a dark red-brown tabby tom.

"I have to tell Rainheart!" Bloomfire stood up. "He'll be so happy!" Dewstorm pulled the kit close to him, and she raced out of the den.

Flameheart looked up when he saw her and stood. "What's going on?" He asked quietly. "Is Poppywing..?"

Bloomfire gave a small nod. "One kit survived," She told him. "I need to tell Rainheart." With that, she dashed out of the camp.

She raced through the forest, following Rainheart's scent. She suddenly paused, her paws skidding across pine needles as she raised her head and tasted the air. *What?* His scent was leading her toward the ThunderClan border.

Just yesterday, Cougarfoot's patrol had found that a fox had moved into an old badger den in their territory near the ThunderClan border. After reporting it, Depthstar advised all cats to stay clear of the area until they decided how to tackle it.

He must have forgotten! Bloomfire dashed onward, feeling more and more anxious as she grew closer and closer to the old badger den. She stopped dead in her tracks when she neared it.

Rainheart's back was turned to her. He sat by the mouth of the den, his head low. The stench of fox filled Bloomfire's nose, almost making her sick.

"Rainheart?" She rasped warily, taking a step toward her brother. "What are you doing here?"

For a moment, he didn't speak. "I can't do it," He rasped. "I can't live without Poppywing."

Bloomfire flattened her ears nervously. She stepped closer. "But I have great news! One of your kits is alive! He was hidden in the blood and moss." She tried to sound happy, but her voice shook.

"I don't care." Rainheart growled. "That kit means nothing to me now." He looked down. "All that I want is Poppywing."

Bloomfire swallowed, her fur bristling with tension at being so close to the fox's den. "Rainheart, let's go back to camp."

"Name the kit Bloodkit. That's all he is. A scrap of Poppywing's blood." The tom got to his paws and looked into the shadows of the den. "I'm coming, Poppywing," He meowed so quietly Bloomfire barely heard him. "We can be together in StarClan." He ran into the den.

"Rainheart!" She yowled in alarm, instinct shooting her forward to save her brother. But the moment she heard a throaty snarl from within the den, she halted and forced herself to step back.

He's trapped in there now! She realized. *The fox will corner him. There's nothing I can do.*

Bloomfire closed her eyes and hung her head, tail drooping as she listened to the fox screech and snarl as it ripped her brother apart. She longed to run away from the horrible sound, but her white paws felt frozen to the ground.

After a few moments, the fox's snarls died into softer growls. A few more moments passed, and everything was silent.

Bloomfire found the strength to move her paws and staggered backwards, shaky with each step. *Oh, Rainheart....*

***

The ShadowClan camp was very quiet that evening. The sun was lowering behind the pine trees, casting long black shadows across the clearing.

Poppywing's body lay in the middle of the camp. Hawkfeather and Dewstorm had groomed her body, and her red tabby pelt looked lively and vibrant in the fading light. Many cats crouched around her, sharing tongues with her for the last time.

Poppywing's mother, an elderly she-cat named Foxshine, was gently lapping at her daughter's fur while her mate, Buzzardglare, sat close by, staring at his kit.

"Poppywing will be missed," Depthstar meowed from atop a large rock near the side of the camp. The sunset gave his near-black pelt an orange glow. "She was a fine warrior," He paused. "And she would have been a fine mother."

Depthstar's deputy, Cobratail, sat on a smaller rock that rested against the one that the clan leader stood on. His black ears were flat, his eyes shut as he slowly swished his mottled tail back and forth. He had lost his sister today.

"And Rainheart," The dark tom went on. "Who was one of the finest young warriors I've seen in moons. He had much to offer to his clan."

Bloomfire sat near the edge of the clearing, her head bowed. Flameheart sat beside her, his tail wrapped around her.

The moment she had delivered the tragic news about Rainheart had been horrible. The clan had already been stunned and upset by Poppywing's death. Bloomfire's mother, Bluerain, had taken it the hardest. She had wailed out in grief and tried to leave the camp to find her son's body. To stop her had been the hardest thing Bloomfire had ever had to do.

"Depthstar," A queen named Poisonedsap meowed from the nursery. "What will we do with the kit?"

The tom hesitated. "Where is it?"

"He is being suckled by Sunflower," The dark golden she-cat meowed, flicking her black tipped tail. "But she is too old to have to take care of another kit. Perhaps I can take him in?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Bluerain leaped to her paws, glaring at the she-cat as she trembled. "That's my son's kit. If anyone is to take him in, surely it's me?"

"The kit is also Poppywing's!" Foxshine retorted. "I have some right to him, too."

Poisonedsap snorted. "You two are far too old to be raising a kit!"

Foxshine bristled, glaring at the queen. "Who are you calling old?"

"Enough!" Depthstar snarled, and the she-cats went silent. "Is this any way to show respect for Rainheart and Poppywing?" He drew in a deep breath. "I have considered something and have consulted Cobratail about it. He agrees with my suggestion."

Bloomfire looked at the clan leader curiously. *Who has he chosen?* She hoped that he didn't choose Poisonedsap. Something about the she-cat rubbed her the wrong way. *Perhaps Sunflower, or*

Diamondrain?

"Bloomfire?"

What? She jumped a little, her eyes widening when she met Depthstar's gaze. Suddenly, every cat in the clan had their eyes on her. "Y-yes?"

Depthstar twitched his fluffy tail. "Would you like to raise Rainheart's kit?"

Bloomfire was speechless for a moment.

"You and Flameheart would be fine parents," Bluerain murmured.

"I... I wasn't prepared for this..." Bloomfire hesitated. She looked at her mate. "What do you think?"

Flameheart twitched his ear. "I've wanted to raise kits. But I always imagined that they would be ours." He paused. "If we do this, we would raise him to believe that he is ours. We could never have kits of our own."

Bloomfire flicked her tail. "We don't need to lie to him."

Flameheart tilted his ginger striped head. "Would you rather have him know that his mother died giving birth to him and his father didn't want to stay with him?" He asked quietly.

Bloomfire's heart sunk. She thought for a moment. "Alright," She meowed quietly. She raised her head to Depthstar. "We'll take him."

"Thank you," He dipped his head. He looked down at the clan. "For the kit's sake, no cat is to say a word about his real parents," He warned. "We know as much as he does."

A ginger tom stepped forward. "What if some cat at the gathering asks about Poppywing's kits?"

"Yes," A tabby she-cat added. "I saw her talking to Mintleaf and Clovernose about how excited she was at gatherings." Her tail drooped.

"We'll tell them that no kit survived," Depthstar meowed quietly. "We must protect the kit from the truth." He paused, looking at Bloomfire. "What will you name him?"

"Bloodkit," She responded almost immediately.

There were several gasps, and even Flameheart cast her a startled look. "Bloodkit?"

"It was Rainheart's last request," Bloomfire meowed quietly. "I cannot ignore it."

It was quiet for a moment.

"Alright," Depthstar meowed quietly. "Bloodkit it is."

"And every cat is okay with this?"

The clan turned their attention to Hawkfeather. The mottled tabby stepped forward, bristling. "This kit was born in blood! And to make matters worse, you decide to call him 'Bloodkit'?"

Depthstar twitched his tail. "What are you saying, Hawkfeather?"

The medicine cat went to the meeting rock to join the dark tom. "I'm saying, this is an omen from StarClan!" He meowed. "And it's not good."

The clan began to murmur anxiously together.

The clan leader hesitated. "Hawkfeather, listen-"

"No, Depthstar!" Hawkfeather's yellow eyes were alight with unease. "That kit is trouble. I know a sign when I see one." He raised his head to the sky. "One day, Bloodkit will do great harm to our clan!"

Chapter 1

[image]

"I've got it!"

"Oh, yeah?"

He sat in the corner of the den, watching his denmates uncertainly. Stonekit pounced on Swiftkit, who let out a squeak as the bigger kit sank his claws into his brother's pelt.

"Ow!" Swiftkit cried, pulling free and scrambling away, his black tail fluffed up. "Poisonedsap, he clawed me!"

Their mother twitched her ear in irritation. "Don't be such a mouse-heart," She snapped. "How are you ever going to be a real warrior if you run away the moment a claw touches your pelt?"

"Yeah, Swiftkit!" Stonekit sneered. "I'm going to be the best warrior in ShadowClan!" He lunged at his brother, who yelped as he was rolled over. "You'll have to be a medicine cat!"

Swiftkit bristled. "No way!" He swiped his claws across his brother's ear.

"Bloodkit?"

Bloodkit jumped a little at his mother's voice and turned his head. Bloomfire lay behind him, gazing at her kit sympathetically. "Why don't you play with your denmates?"

He hesitated, shifting closer to her. "They play so rough," He meowed quietly. "They probably won't like me anyway."

"Don't be silly." Bloomfire leaned down and swiped her tongue over his head. "Of course they'll like you. Go on and say hello."

Bloodkit watched as Swiftkit and Stonekit circled each other, tails lashing. What if he got hurt?

"Go on," She murmured, gently nudging him with her nose, and he hesitantly padded over to them.

"H-hello," Bloodkit began.

"Ha!" Stonekit swiped a black paw at Swiftkit, who reared backwards in response, and Bloodkit quickly leaped back just before the black and white kit bumped into him.

"Hello!" Bloodkit stammered.

Stonekit paused, flicking his yellow eyes to Bloodkit. "Oh, it's him." He grunted. "We don't want to play with him. Hawkfeather said-" Poisonedsap let out a warning growl behind them, and the big kit said no more.

What did Hawkfeather say about me? Bloodkit's red tabby tail drooped. *Great, even the clan medicine cat hates me!* For as long as he could remember, every cat in the clan behaved differently when he was near. Some outright ignored him or cast him cold glances, while others looked at him with a great deal of sympathy in their eyes. Bloodkit couldn't understand why, and constantly tried to think of what he had done to make his clan act so strangely around him.

Swiftkit looked at his brother sharply, then stepped toward Bloodkit. "Nevermind him," He meowed. "You can play with me."

"I can?" Bloodkit blinked at him in surprise, and behind him, Bloomfire purred.

"Of course!" Swiftkit waved his tail happily. "We can play moss ball."

Bloodkit bounded toward the tom kit eagerly. He hadn't played with another kit since Stripedpaw, Mottledpaw, and Creampaw had left the nursery. Now that they were apprentices, they never seemed to want to play with him. Of course they would rather focus on their training than waste time with a lonely kit.

"Not in here, you won't!" Poisonedsap lashed her tail. "I've been hit in the head with moss balls far too much! Go into the clearing."

"Okay." Swiftkit picked up the moss ball with his teeth and turned, racing out of the nursery. "Come on!" He mumbled. Bloodkit hesitated, staring out at the camp clearing uncertainly. He didn't like to leave the nursery. It seemed like every time he did, some cat would look at him funny or murmur a strange comment.

Swiftkit poked his head into the nursery, dropping the moss ball. "Are you coming?"

Too afraid of facing the clan, he was about to refuse when he noticed the amount of friendliness in the kit's blue eyes. Only Bloomfire and his father had ever looked at him with such acceptance. He had always been wary of Poisonedsap's kits before. They always played so violently and they seemed mean. Stonekit certainly was, but Swiftkit seemed very friendly when he wasn't around his brother.

Finally, some other cat likes me! Bloodkit thought happily. "Yeah!" He bounded out of the nursery, and Swiftkit spun to race him. Bloodkit felt the summer sun warm his pelt as he dashed into the clearing. He followed Swiftkit to the side of the clearing where the kit spun around and tossed the moss ball at him. "Ha!"

Bloodkit immediately shot up on his hind legs, reaching up and batting the ball of moss back to Swiftkit, feeling a rush of satisfaction. *I think that was a good hit!*

"Wow, you're good!" Swiftkit exclaimed. He leaped into the air and swat the ball back to him.

Bloodkit dove forward to catch it, but the moss hit the ground before he could. He fell awkwardly onto his side and squeaked, scrambling to his paws and shaking pine needles from his pelt. "Sorry."

"Don't be!" The black and white kit nudged the moss toward him.

He carefully scooped the moss up in his paw and flung it at Swiftkit, who laughed as he swat it back to him. Bloodkit bat it back, letting out a happy meow. He wasn't sure if he'd ever felt so carefree and happy before. He was always so self conscious about what his

clanmates thought of him.

I don't care what they think. He decided. *Swiftkit, Flameheart, and Bloomfire like me. Maybe that's all I need!* He hesitated as a worrying thought came to him. *But what if Depthstar doesn't like me? Then he won't make me a warrior!* An even more horrifying thought. *What if he refuses to let me train as an apprentice? Maybe he'll make me become a medicine cat. But Hawkfeather doesn't even like me.. What will I-* He snapped out of his thoughts as the moss ball bounced off his head. "Oh!"

"Hey, how'd you miss that?" Swiftkit purred in amusement, waving his tail.

"Sorry." Bloodkit hesitantly looked around the camp for the first time since he'd come outside. Two senior warriors, Ashcloud and Rosebreeze, sat a few fox lengths from him, watching. But as soon as Bloodkit caught Rosebreeze's gaze, she looked away, and Ashcloud twitched his tail awkwardly.

"What do you think of him?"

Bloodkit's heart skipped a beat as he overheard some cats murmuring behind him.

"He's a harmless kit, Crowmask."

"No, he's bad news. I've known from the day he was born."

He hung his head, trying to block out the murmuring, but he couldn't. He padded over to the edge of the clearing and sat under the bushes, hiding himself in their shadow. He curled his tail over his paws.

"Hey." Swiftkit padded over to him, the happiness fading from his blue eyes. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

Bloodkit shook his head, longing to push himself deeper into the bushes. But some of the branches were studded with thorns. He didn't dare move any closer to them. Swiftkit hesitated, looking over his shoulder at the other cats in the clearing. "You... You don't know that they were talking about you."

"Of course they were," Bloodkit muttered. "Who else would it be? They're always talking about me behind my back." He lashed his tail. "I don't understand," He choked, feeling sadness overwhelm him. "What's wrong with me? What did I do wrong?"

Swiftkit sat beside him. "I don't know," He meowed. "I was born only a moon before you. I can't remember a lot about the first few weeks after you were born. I was so young, and my eyes were just opening. But I doubt you did anyone any harm when you were a newborn kit."

"I must have done something."

Swiftkit tilted his head thoughtfully. "Have you asked Bloomfire?"

"She says I've done nothing wrong," Bloodkit meowed quietly. "I don't believe her."

"Do you really think your mother would lie to you?"

Bloodkit thought about this. "No," He admitted. "She would never lie to me. Or Flameheart." He felt a pang of comfort. He put a lot of trust into his mother and father. No matter what, they would always give him the truth.

"So then, the clan is a bunch of mouse-brains," Swiftkit nudged him playfully. "There's nothing wrong with you. You'll show them one day when you're the greatest warrior ever!"

[image]

Bloodkit felt some of the weight lifted from him. But he still worried about Depthstar's approval. "If Depthstar makes me a warrior." He said.

"Of course he will!" Swiftkit meowed. "And if he's mouse brained enough not to, I'll follow him all day throwing moss balls at that big furry head of his." Bloodkit let out a purr of amusement, imagining this.

"Come on, let's finish our game!" Swiftkit urged, turning and racing further into the clearing. He looked back at him. "Or I win."

"Oh, yeah?" Bloodkit purred and started toward him.

"But you have to catch me, first!" Swiftkit ducked his head and grasped the moss in his teeth, racing away.

"Hey!" He laughed and bounded after the kit. All of his sadness and uncertainty had been washed away. *I need to focus on the good things!* He realized. *I'll never get anywhere being sad.*

Swiftkit dodged a warrior who grumbled at him in annoyance. "Sorry, Cougarfoot!" He called over his shoulder. Bloodkit purred in amusement as he followed the kit past the golden furred tom, feeling the warm air flow between his whiskers. Swiftkit suddenly made a sharp turn by the warriors den, and Bloodkit gasped as he skidded on the pine needles and rolled toward the bushes near the den. He let out a yelp of pain as a thorn jabbed into his side.

Swiftkit looked over his shoulder as he ran. "Come on, slow slug!" He purred. In his path, Depthstar was padding out of his den, speaking with Cobratail. Whatever they were talking about, it seemed important, because they were so focused on their conversation they didn't look in Swiftkit's direction to see him coming.

Bloodkit looked at him and tensed. *Oh no! He's going to crash into the clan leader and deputy! He'll be in trouble!* "Swiftkit, look out!" He gasped, bounding forward, ignoring the pain that shot through his side.

"What?" Swiftkit looked ahead and squeaked in alarm, trying to stop, but he skidded onward on pine needles. Bloodkit grunted as he leaped into him, pushing him out of the way of the leader and deputy. "Ow!" Swiftkit shrieked out, and Bloodkit froze.

Oh, no!

He'd pushed Swiftkit right into the wall of thorns. The black and white kit stumbled forward, whimpering. Thorns stuck out of his pelt, and he limped.

"What in the name of StarClan-" Cobratail began.

"Swiftkit!" Poisonedsap bounded across the clearing, lapping his forehead. "Oh, my poor kit!"

"Hawkfeather!" Depthstar called. "Come quick!"

Bloodkit stared at Swiftkit anxiously. He saw tiny drops of blood in the white areas of his fur. "I'm sorry!"

The tabby medicine cat bounded over with a wad of cobwebs in his mouth. He sat by the injured kit and set down the cobwebs. "Don't you worry, Swiftkit, it's just a few thorns. Nothing serious." He began plucking thorns out of the kits pelt with his teeth, and Swiftkit yelped. "Ow!"

"Don't be so weak, Swiftkit!" Stonekit grunted, sitting by his mother and curling his white tail over his black paws. "It's just a few thorns! You've gotten worse out of my claws."

For a heartbeat, Bloodkit was tempted to push the big kit into the thorns and see how he liked it.

"What happened?" Hawkfeather prompted.

"W-well, I-" Swiftkit began.

"It was Bloodkit!" Poisonedsap suddenly snarled, swinging her head toward him. "He pushed Swiftkit into the thorns!"

"No!" Bloodkit stammered, stepping back, startled by the queen's sudden fury and the hatred burning in her eyes. "I-I didn't mean to- I was just-"

"No excuses!" She snarled. "I saw it myself!"

"So did I." Ashcloud put in. Bloodkit froze, turning around. It seemed like the whole clan was surveying the scene.

"Yes, Bloodkit pushed him." Rosebreeze meowed.

"H-He was going to run into Depthstar, and-" Bloodkit felt his pelt burn with shame under the eyes of the clan. "I didn't mean for him to end up in the thorns!" He started toward Swiftkit. "Swiftkit, you

know-"

Poisonedsap hissed and Bloodkit whimpered, scrambling back with his tail between his legs. "You stay away from my son!" She bared her teeth at him. "You're nothing but trouble to this clan!"

Depthstar was watching Bloodkit, not giving away any emotion. Bloodkit whimpered, lowering himself to the ground. *Everyone is looking at me! Everyone thinks I hurt Swiftkit! I wouldn't hurt anyone!*

"What's going on here?"

Bloodkit had never been more relieved to hear his father's voice. The ginger tabby stepped in front of him, glaring at Poisonedsap. "Don't talk to my son like that!"

"Your son, Flameheart," Poisonedsap echoed, her eyes gleaming. "*Your son* just pushed Swiftkit into the thorn bushes!"

"Bloodkit would never do that," Flameheart retorted. "He's a good kit."

"He's a worthless hairball, that's what he is," Poisonedsap sneered. A growl rose in Flameheart's throat, and his tail lashed. Poisonedsap unsheathed her claws.

"Enough!" Depthstar stepped between the two warriors. "We all saw what happened." He looked behind Flameheart. "Bloodkit, what do you have to say?"

Bloodkit's heart pounded. "B-but I didn't-"

"Bloodkit," The clan leader's meow hardened, and Bloodkit tensed. "There's no call for harming your clanmates. Even if it was just a game. Causing unnecessary injuries and wasting Hawkfeather's herbs is unacceptable. Apologize."

Bloodkit pressed himself harder to the ground, wishing a hole would open up beneath him and swallow him, hiding him from the world. The cold gaze of the strong black tom made him feel worse. *The clan leader really hates me now!* "I'm sorry," Bloodkit whimpered. He meant it. *I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I pushed him. I'm sorry none of you*

like me. I'm sorry I was born...

"Good." Depthstar nodded, and the clan began to dismember.

"Let's take him to the medicine den," Hawkfeather meowed to Poisonedsap. "He took a lot of thorns. I'll just give him a couple poppy seeds."

Poisonedsap nodded and carefully picked up Swiftkit by his scruff. She glared down at Bloodkit, her tail lashing. Hawkfeather followed her gaze for a moment. "Keep an eye on that kit, Flameheart," He murmured before leading Poisonedsap to his den.

Bloodkit was too scared to move. He felt like if he dared step out from under Flameheart, some cat would attack him. Especially Poisonedsap. *I'll just stay here.* He thought. *Flameheart will protect me.* But his father stepped back, looking down at him. Bloodkit hesitantly looked up at him. "Do you believe me?" He whimpered, expecting to see anger or disappointment in his eyes.

But instead, Flameheart looked nothing but sympathetic. "Of course I do," He promised. "You would never harm any cat. Let's go to the nursery. Your mother will be waiting."

Anxiety swarmed through his stomach like bees. "Will she be mad at me?" Bloodkit asked.

"No," He promised. "You can tell us both what really happened." He swiped his tongue over Bloodkit's ear before picking him up by his scruff. Bloodkit would normally object to being carried like such a young kit. But today, he just let him. *I might stay a kit forever anyway, if Depthstar doesn't want to apprentice me.* He thought miserably.

Chapter 2

[image]

"What happened?" Bloomfire meowed as Flameheart entered the den. She lay in her nest, looking ready to go to sleep. Crickets chirped outside in the night."I heard Swiftkit had an accident."

Flameheart set Bloodkit down in front of her. "Yes, just a little quarrel with some thorns. He'll be alright."

"Are you alright, Bloodkit?" She looked at her kit.

Bloodkit looked down, unable to meet his mother's gaze. *Will Flameheart tell her what happened? Will she be mad? Will she believe me if I tell her the truth?*

"Bloodkit?" Bloomfire stared at him, her eyes growing round with concern.

When he didn't respond, Flameheart sat down beside his mate. "The clan thinks that Bloodkit pushed Swiftkit into the thorn barrier." He told her.

Bloomfire's orange ears flicked forward. "What?" She exclaimed. "He would never do that!"

"I know he wouldn't." Flameheart looked down at Bloodkit. "The clan wouldn't hear him out. Will you tell us exactly what happened?"

Bloodkit shuffled his paws. "What does it matter?" He whispered. "The clan still thinks I did it."

"Nevermind that," His father told him. "We know you didn't. And if you tell us exactly what happened, we can tell Depthstar, and he'll understand."

Bloodkit hesitated, feeling a bit comforted by that. *If Depthstar believes me, maybe he'll like me and let me be a warrior..!* "Well," He

rasped, shuffling his paws. "We were playing, and Depthstar and Cobratail were coming out of the leader's den. Swiftkit was looking back at me as he was running, he didn't see them." He looked up. Flameheart and Bloomfire were watching him, listening intently. "I thought he was going to run straight into them, and get in trouble," Bloodkit mewed. "So I pushed him out of the way." Guilt pulsed through his stomach. "I never meant for him to get hurt!"

"Oh, Bloodkit..." Bloomfire lowered her head and began lapping at his fur. She paused. "Of course you didn't."

"I'll tell Depthstar right now." Flameheart told him, giving his head a lick. "Would you like to come?" Bloodkit shook his head, too afraid to face the clan leader again. "Alright. Don't worry, we'll sort this out," He promised. "I'll be right back." He turned and ducked out of the den.

I hope Depthstar believes him..! Bloodkit thought anxiously. *It's my only chance to be a warrior!* An alarming thought jolted through him. *What does Swiftkit think of me, now? Does he think I meant to hurt him, too??* He looked up at his mother anxiously. "Can I go see Swiftkit?"

Bloomfire gazed at him. "Of course."

Bloodkit headed for the den exit and hesitated, peering out warily. The camp looked empty and dark. He saw two shapes near the camp entrance and decided that they must be the guards for tonight. Figuring it was safe, he stepped out into the clearing. He headed for the medicine den and poked his head in.

Hawkfeather and his apprentice, Dewstorm, slept in their nests on the far side of the den, their herbs sorted in neat piles along the wall of the den. Across from them, Poisonedsap lay on the ground, her black tipped tail curled over her nose. Stonekit lay a few mouse lengths from her, his ear twitching occasionally in his sleep. Swiftkit lay on his side in a nest close to Dewstorm, his black flank rising and falling softly as he slept.

Bloodkit cast Poisonedsap a nervous glance, remembering how furious the golden she-cat had been earlier. He could only imagine

how angry she would be if she woke up and saw him. Something about her had always rubbed him the wrong way. But now, he was truly afraid of her. He remembered how she'd unsheathed her claws during the argument with Flameheart.

Would she have attacked him? Bloodkit suddenly wondered. *Would she have drawn blood? It's against the warrior code to harm a clanmate, isn't it?* He stared at the jagged, thorn-sharp claws glinting through her dark fur, imagining them tearing through his father's pelt... He shuddered and turned his attention back to Swiftkit. He cautiously padded past Poisonedsap and crouched by him.

"Swiftkit..." Bloodkit whispered. When he didn't move, he gave the tom-kit's shoulder a gentle prod. "Swiftkit."

"Wha?" Swiftkit stirred, blinking open his blue eyes. "Bloodkit?" He looked confused. Suddenly, Bloodkit didn't know what to say. *Why didn't I plan this out??* He thought miserably. "What's up?" Swiftkit murmured, his eyelids lowering, looking drowsy.

"Are you mad at me?" Bloodkit blurted out.

"What?" Swiftkit blinked. "Why would I-" He paused, his eyes softening. "I know you didn't push me into the thorns on purpose, Bloodkit."

He looked at him hopefully. "You do?"

"Of course," Swiftkit meowed. "You wouldn't hurt me like Stonekit and-" He broke off and cast his mother a nervous look. He lowered his voice. "Anyway, I would have run into Depthstar and Cobratail if you hadn't stopped me. Now that would have been embarrassing!"

Bloodkit twitched his whiskers in amusement before turning serious again. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired," Swiftkit replied. "Hawkfeather gave me poppy seeds, and they sure do make you sleepy."

"Swiftkit,"

Bloodkit nearly jumped out of his fur and the quiet meow behind

him. He spun around, bristling. A creamy tabby tom stood in the entrance to the den, yellow eyes flashing in the darkness. After a heartbeat, Bloodkit recognized him. It was Swiftkit's father, Maplefur.

Swiftkit let out a soft purr as the warrior leaned over him and swiped his tongue over his ear. "I heard about what happened. Are you alright?"

"I'm okay," Swiftkit replied.

Maplefur looked at Bloodkit, and he tensed. He had always seemed nicer than Poisonedsap, but he wasn't sure what the cream furred warrior thought of him. "I just spoke with Depthstar and Flameheart." Maplefur meowed.

Bloodkit stared up at him nervously. "I-I-"

"He didn't mean to hurt me," Swiftkit meowed. "It was an accident."

"I know." Maplefur murmured.

Bloodkit's ears perked forward in surprise. *He believes me?*

"Bloodkit," The tom sat down, and Bloodkit felt his stomach churn under the warrior's gaze. "I hear what the clan says about you. I'm sure you do, too." He paused, seeming to choose his next words carefully. "Our paths aren't laid out at birth.... Like some cats think. It's up to us to build them." Bloodkit stared at him, fascinated as he took in Maplefur's words.

"The clan may think they know who you are," Maplefur went on quietly. "And what you may become... But they don't. Not yet. You need to show them who you are."

"How do I do that?" Bloodkit asked anxiously.

"It will take time," the tom told him. "You need to be patient. Never let anyone cause you doubt. Focus on your training, and one day you'll be one of ShadowClan's finest warriors. You'll prove your loyalty and worth to them."

"You really think so?" Bloodkit asked.

Maplefur nodded. "I do."

Bloodkit felt his heart pound with anticipation. Suddenly, he was filled with courage and determination. Maplefur's words gave him hope. He *would* be a warrior. And he *would* show ShadowClan just how valuable he was!

"Thank you!" Bloodkit squeaked. "Thank you so much!" He ran out of the den. "See you, Swiftkit!" He went straight back to the nursery, where Bloomfire lay, Flameheart sitting close to her. They looked at him as he ran in.

"Bloodkit, I spoke to Depthstar," Flameheart began. Bloodkit stopped in his tracks, staring at his father anxiously. What had Depthstar said?

"He understands, and believes that he misjudged the situation," He told him. "He wanted me to tell you he's sorry for putting the blame on you."

The happiness flowed through him again like floodwater. Bloodkit let out a delighted purr and raced at Bloomfire, pressing himself against her orange pelt. "He believes me!" He cried. "Maplefur, too! And Swiftkit!"

Bloomfire purred and nuzzled his head. Flameheart lay down and rested his muzzle against Bloodkit's shoulder. "Of course," He purred. "And so do we."

I'm going to be a warrior! Bloodkit thought, a loud purr rumbling in his throat as his parents cuddled him. *I'm going to be the best warrior in ShadowClan!*

Chapter 3

[image]

Two moons had passed, and ever since that night, Bloodkit felt happier about his life. He spent his days playing with Swiftkit, despite the cold looks Poisonedsap and Stonekit gave him whenever he went near the other kit. He and Swiftkit had made up more games since. In addition to moss-ball, they had tag, pounce, and frogs.

But that wasn't the only change in the nursery. Last moon, Diamondrain had given birth to a couple of kits: Mistykit and Coldkit. The kits looked very similar. Both wore silvery gray pelts and darker points. However, Coldkit was a bit darker than his sister. They didn't do much but squirm around their mother and suckle. Their eyes hadn't opened yet. Bloodkit was glad that he wasn't the youngest kit in the nursery anymore.

"Got you!" Bloodkit caught up to Swiftkit and poked him in the shoulder. "You're it!"

"You'd better watch out!" the black and white kit yowled playfully, and Bloodkit yelped, rearing back before the white paw could touch him. He raced toward Bloomfire, and she gasped as the two kits leaped over her.

"Great Starclan!" Poisonedsap hissed, lashing her tail as she watched the kits, her amber eyes no more than narrow slits.

"Watch out for Diamondrain's kits!" Bloomfire added warily. "They're too young for such rough play."

"It's alright," The silver queen assured her, curling her silky tail over her kits. "I'm keeping an eye on those rascals," She purred.

Bloomfire let out a purr. "Wait until yours are that age. They do nothing but cause trouble."

Bloodkit paused, skidding to a halt and looking over his shoulder. "Hey!"

His mother let out an amused purr, her green eyes glowing with affection. Swiftkit suddenly barreled into him, pinning him on his stomach. "Got you!" He yowled triumphantly.

"That's not fair!" Bloodkit exclaimed in dismay as Swiftkit stepped off of him. "Bloomfire distracted me." He sat up and shook out his dark red fur.

Stonekit sat near Poisonedsap, watching his brother through narrow yellow slits. He lashed his thick white tail. "I'm bored," He complained.

"Yes, Swiftkit, come play with your brother!" Poisonedsap growled. "You do nothing but play unproductive games with Bloodkit." Bloodkit twitched his ear. *Unproductive?*

Swiftkit hesitated, casting him a look. "But-"

Poisonedsap let out a warning growl.

"O-okay," Swiftkit took a wary step back from Bloodkit. "We'll play again later, okay?"

"Okay." Bloodkit sat down near Bloomfire, flicking the tip of his tail over his paws. It was clear that Poisonedsap didn't approve of his friendship with Swiftkit. But he didn't think about it anymore. *I like Swiftkit, and Swiftkit likes me.* He thought. *We aren't harming anyone! If she has a problem with it, that's-*

"Rrrahh!" Stonekit lunged at Swiftkit, who let out a startled squeak as he was pinned.

"Great attack, Stonekit!" Poisonedsap praised, watching her kits eagerly. "Now go for his belly."

Swiftkit let out a shriek as the larger white kit raked his claws across his white belly fur before he swung a black forearm at his brother, catching his ear. Stonekit let out a cry as his ear was torn open, rearing back from Swiftkit, who launched his own attack.

"Good, Swiftkit!" Poisonedsap purred.

Bloodkit could only watch in horror as Stonekit and Swiftkit fought, drawing blood and sending tiny tufts of black and white fur across the den, while their mother watched intently, encouraging them. *They can't do that!* Bloodkit thought anxiously. *You're not allowed to unsheathe your claws in training. And they aren't even training! They're supposed to be playing!*

Bloodkit felt his fur bristle as he watched the two brothers "play", shrieking and snarling in both pain and fury as they fought with teeth and claws. He saw blood on their pelts. Unable to watch anymore, he looked back at his mother anxiously. "Do something!" He begged. "Make them stop!"

Bloomfire looked uncomfortable, her white tail tip twitching. She exchanged a nervous look with Diamondrain, who dropped her head to lick her kits.

Bloodkit looked from Bloomfire to Diamondrain in disbelief. *Why aren't they saying anything? Why aren't they doing anything?* He looked back to the fight and tensed as he saw Poisonedsap looking at the two queens, her eyes gleaming with satisfaction. *Did she say something to them?* Bloodkit wondered. He heard Swiftkit shriek and froze, snapping his attention to the kits.

Swiftkit pulled himself away from his brother, tufts of black fur falling to the ground. He limped on his front paw, and Bloodkit noticed one of his toes damp with crimson. *Did Stonekit rip one of his claws out?!* He saw a few scratches on his muzzle, and several nicks in his ears.

Stonekit growled softly, his tail lashing fiercely. Blood trickled from a cut above his eye. He began to circle his brother. "Why don't you play with *me* anymore? *I'm* supposed to be your best friend!"

Swiftkit whimpered and cast his injured paw a brief glance, as if he wanted to study the damage. He looked at his mother anxiously. Poisonedsap watched Swiftkit, her expression giving nothing away. She clearly had no intentions of stopping the fight. Stonekit looked more angry than ever and definitely wasn't finished with Swiftkit.

He let out a snarl, preparing to attack.

If no one else is going to stop this, then I will! I can't let Swiftkit get hurt! OR Stonekit! "No!" Bloodkit ran between the two kits, looking from Swiftkit to Stonekit anxiously. "You have to-" He shrieked as Stonekit shouldered into him, knocking him aside and swiping a black paw at his face. Bloodkit ducked on instinct and let out a startled shriek as Stonekit's claws met his ear, sending pain bolting through it.

"Hey!" Bloomfire leaped to her paws and pulled Bloodkit close with her paw. Stonekit bared his teeth and started toward him, but Poisonedsap growled and he stopped.

"Are you alright?" Bloomfire wailed, covering Bloodkit with fierce licks. "Oh, your ear!" Bloodkit felt frozen with shock. His ear stung and felt wet. *I'm bleeding!*

"Hawkfeather!" Bloomfire yowled anxiously, ignoring Poisonedsap's glare. "Hawkfeather, come quick!"

Dewstorm poked his head into the den. "Hawkfeather went out to look for catmint. What's-" He broke off, his yellow eyes widening. "What in StarClan's name happened?" He shot into the den. "Why are the kits bleeding?"

"I told them not to play so roughly!" Poisonedsap cried. "The stupid furball's wouldn't listen!"

"What?" Bloodkit exclaimed. "You-" Bloomfire swept her tail over his muzzle before he could finish. *I don't understand!*

"You three should know better!" Dewstorm exclaimed. "This is serious!" He turned away. "Come to my den, all three of you." Bloodkit nervously followed Swiftkit and Stonekit to the medicine den, Poisonedsap and Bloomfire following. His legs felt shaky and weak. He'd never been in a real fight before. It was terrifying.

"Sit down," Dewstorm urged as the cats filled into the den. He quickly clawed some cobwebs together and dabbed at Stonekit's scratches. The kit noticed Bloodkit watching and lashed his tail. *If I*

hadn't ducked in time, he would have blinded me. Bloodkit realized. *He must hate me so much for being friends with Swiftkit.* He looked beside him. The black and white kit was lapping at his wounded front paw. His other injuries didn't look too bad.

"Are you okay?" Bloodkit mewed.

Swiftkit licked his paw for a moment longer before responding. "I'm fine." He didn't look at Bloodkit. "Your ear doesn't look so good, though." He let out a raspy purr. "Depthstar might have to call you Bloodear." He knew Swiftkit had meant that as a joke, but he didn't look like himself. He looked very... uneasy.

"What happened?" Maplefur poked his head into the den and gasped. "Stonekit!" He shot to his son's side, touching his pink nose to his ear. "What happened?" He demanded, then spotted Swiftkit. "Your paw!" He brushed past Poisonedsap, who growled lowly as he began lapping at Swiftkit's fur.

"They were playing and got a little carried away." Dewstorm told him as Swiftkit stretched his arm out, and he began wrapping cobwebs around the kit's paw. "They have some nasty cuts, but they'll heal."

Maplefur bristled, glancing at his mate. "Playing, eh?" Poisonedsap's eyes were fixed on him, her tail lashing back and forth slowly.

"Poisonedsap, a word?" He growled, twitching his cream striped tail as he left the den. The golden brown she-cat rose and followed him out, her ragged tail dragging behind her.

Bloodkit stared after them curiously. He saw that Dewstorm was still busy with Swiftkit. He wouldn't get to his injuries for a while. He hesitated before padding over to the mouth of the den, peering out into the clearing. Poisonedsap and Maplefur stood a few fox length's away, tails lashing.

"I told you, I don't like them fighting like that," Maplefur meowed quietly. "They need to keep their claws sheathed."

Poisonedsap lashed her tail fiercely. "If they're going to be strong

warriors, they need to know how to use their claws!" She snapped. "When they're apprenticed, StarClan knows their mentors will make them battle train like a couple of declawed kittypets!"

Maplefur looked stunned. "So you'd rather have *this*?" He lashed his tail toward the medicine den. "You're lucky they weren't seriously injured!"

"Injuries are a part of life," She retorted. "It's best they learn that sooner than later."

"No," He growled. "They are *kits*! They are *not* supposed to suffer like this!"

"It's *training!"* Poisonedsap retorted. "And they need it. Especially Swiftkit. All the time he spends with that-that *Bloodkit* has made him weak."

"No!" Maplefur stepped toward her aggressively, and she narrowed her eyes. "You'll stop this cruel training of yours at once! And if anything like this happens again, I'll tell Depthstar what you're doing, and you can be a rogue again."

Poisonedsap was a rogue? Bloodkit was stunned. *That explains why she's so mean... But how did she join Shadowclan?*

The golden she-cat studied him calmly. "You know better than that, Maplefur." He held her gaze and for a moment, the two cats were silent, tails lashing. *Are they going to fight?* Bloodkit wondered.

"I don't like seeing my kits like this." Maplefur growled.

"Then don't see them." Poisonedsap raised a black paw, beginning to lick her claws clean. "Don't see them ever again."

Maplefur's pale yellow eyes widened. "What? They're my kits, too!"

"They're *my* kits, as far as I'm concerned." Poisonedsap growled. "They don't need a father. You only weaken them."

"Poisoned-"

She let out a snarl, her neck fur bristling. "Don't ever come near those kits again, Maplefur," She growled. "Or you'll be sorry." She spun around, and Bloodkit shot back into the den before she saw him. Maplefur stared after her.

Chapter 4

[image]

A quarter moon had passed since the fight between Stonekit and Swiftkit. Since then, Diamondrain's kits had opened their eyes. They both had blue ones like their mother.

Bloodkit had been there at the time. He remembered when he'd first opened his eyes. It was an amazing moment to see his mother and father's pelts, the nursery, and the camp. He wanted to see their moment. Coldkit had opened his eyes while climbing onto his mother's back. He'd squeaked out in surprise when he'd seen her. "You're eyes are so blue!"

Diamondrain had purred and touched her nose to his. "So are yours, little one."

Mistykit's eyes had opened a few moments later. Bloodkit had been sitting in front of her, waiting eagerly to see her moment. When it came, she had stared at him for a long while. "Wow!'

He'd been nervous, suddenly feeling guilty that he had been the first thing she'd lain eyes on. "W-what is it?"

"Your eyes!" She'd squeaked, leaning toward him until her face was pressed to his. Bloodkit was afraid their eyes would touch if she came any closer. "They're like the sun!"

He had purred in amusement. "You don't even know what the sun looks like!"

"Now I do!" She'd exclaimed. "Like *that* !"

[image]

The warm green-leaf air was beginning to fade away, replaced by a cool autumn breeze. The majority of the trees on ShadowClan's territory were pine trees, however, a couple oaks stood nearby, their branches stretching over part of the camp. The leaves on the trees melted into shades of orange and red, before drifting into the clearing.

"Look at that one!" Bloodkit exclaimed, letting out an excited purr as he pounced onto a bright red leaf, planting his forepaws firmly at its center. He twitched his ear. The one that Stonekit had scratched. It was split a little at the tip. It didn't hurt anymore, but it felt funny. Dewstorm had told him that he would get used to it. The split would never heal. It would remain with him his whole life.

Swiftkit purred in amusement. "It would match your pelt if it was a bit darker." He raised his head, pointing his white muzzle at the sky as he studied the trees. "What do you think leaf-bare is like?"

He followed Swiftkit's gaze at the trees. "What do you think *snow* is like? I can't wait to see it!"

"Leaf-bare isn't something to look forward to."

The kits turned to see a dark brown and gray warrior padding over to them. "Prey is scarce, and snow is cold on your pads, and leaks through the dens. Cats go hungry."

"Well, we'll find all the prey from here to fourtrees when we're apprentices!" Bloodkit promised, puffing out his red-furred chest. "We won't let any cat go hungry!"

"Yeah, Cliffshade," Swiftkit purred. "You can count on us!"

Cliffshade twitched his ear, his yellow eyes unimpressed. "Yes, I'm sure two apprentices will make all the difference."

"Don't be so negative!" A brown tabby she-cat named Greenpine padded over to stand beside the tom. "Don't listen to Cliffshade. He's nothing but a grumpy old tom." Cliffshade shot her an irritated look, and she flicked his shoulder with her tail in amusement.

"I need a patrol to check the ThunderClan border!" A yowl rang out from the other side of the clearing. Bloodkit looked to see the clan deputy, Cobratail, leap onto the rock where Depthstar would stand to address the clan. The broad shouldered black and red tom looked around the clearing as cats gathered before him.

"Crowmask's patrol found ThunderClan scent on our side of the thunderpath," Cobratail went on. "I'm taking a patrol to see for myself." He leaped down from the rock as cats began to meow at him.

"I'll go," A broad shouldered golden warrior meowed.

Cobratail nodded. "Alright, Cougarfoot. Bring Mottledpaw with you."

"Awesome!" His mottled brown apprentice waved his tail eagerly. "I'll rip apart any ThunderClan warrior that dares set paw on our territory!"

Bloodkit admired Mottledpaw's courage, though he disagreed that using claws was the best way to solve their problems. He'd seen his denmates fight, it had horrified him. And they were only kits! He was afraid to see what a real fight between grown warriors was like.

Cougarfoot looked at his apprentice. "Calm down," He growled. "There will be no 'ripping apart' of any ThunderClan warrior until we are sure that they have been crossing the border."

Mottledpaw twitched his ear. "Their scent was on our side. That's enough proof to me."

"Ashcloud, Cliffshade, and Greenpine, I'll take you three as well," Cobratail waved his mottled tail.

Greenpine flicked Cliffshade's nose with her tail. "Come on, fox-breath!" She teased and raced away. The brown and gray warrior grumbled crossly as he followed her more slowly to the deputy.

Bloodkit watched as the patrol headed through the thorn tunnel. *It must be so fun to go out into the forest to hunt, and patrol...* "I can't wait to be apprenticed tomorrow," Swiftkit murmured from beside him, as though he could read his thoughts.

"Me t-" Bloodkit broke off and looked at him in surprise. "Tomorrow?"

Swiftkit nodded, his blue eyes glowing with anticipation. "Yup! Tomorrow I'll be six moons old!"

Bloodkit studied him, and suddenly realized how much his denmate had grown. He had grown into his big paws, and he had little kitten fluff left. It was being replaced with thick, sleek fur. He looked down. "That's great!" He tried to sound happy for his friend.

Swiftkit frowned. "What's wrong?"

Bloodkit hesitated, looking at his paws. "You're my only friend," He meowed quietly. "I won't be an apprentice for another two moons. What will I do without you?"

The black and white kit's eyes softened. "Hey, don't worry! It's not like I'm leaving the clan! I'll still be around, and I'll visit you whenever I can."

"Really?" He looked at Swiftkit hopefully. "Won't you be busy with your training, and the other apprentices? You won't want to hang out with a kit."

"You're my best friend, Bloodkit," Swiftkit meowed. "Of course I still want to hang out with you! Besides, you'll be apprenticed soon enough, and then we can train and practice together!"

Bloodkit purred, comforted with this. "I can't wait! We're going to

be great apprentices!"

***

That night, Bloodkit cuddled against Bloomfire in their nest, ready to settle down for the night. "Good night," Bloomfire purred and rasped her pink tongue over his head. "Sweet dreams."

"Good night," He purred and curled into a ball, resting his chin on his paws. He curled his tail around him and turned his head to look at his denmates.

Diamondrain was already asleep, her silver tail curled around Mistykit and Coldkit, who lay together soundly. Not far from them, Poisonedsap lay in her nest, Stonekit close to her. Swiftkit slept a little further from them, his black tail curled around him, the tip brushing his nose. Bloodkit let out a soft, content purr. *Everything feels okay right now...*

***

Bloodkit felt himself regain consciousness, his mind fuzzy with sleepiness. He kept his eyes closed, waiting for sleep to overtake him once more. A paw gently prodded his side. "Bloomfire..." He mumbled, twitching his ear.

"Wake up, Bloodkit."

Bloodkit's eyes snapped open, his heart skipping a beat. That wasn't his mother's voice. In fact, it wasn't *any* voice that he recognized.

He scrambled to his paws, astonished as he took in his surroundings. *This isn't the nursery!* He was in a forest, but it didn't look like ShadowClan territory. The trees looked... perfect. Their trunks thick and smooth, bathed in moonlight, branches stretching out across the starry night sky. The grass shimmered, as if sprinkled with dewdrops. The thick, green bushes rustled with prey.

Bloodkit looked up at the cat who had woken him. She was a beautiful red tabby she-cat, her fur shining with starlight. Her blue eyes glowed with warmth and welcome as she gazed at him. "Hello, Bloodkit," She murmured, her eyes fixed on him. "I've looked

forward to meeting you."

Bloodkit stared at her, awestruck. "I-I..." He swallowed. "Who are you? Where am I?"

The she-cat didn't respond right away. She sat down and curled her tail neatly over her paws. "Where do you think you are, Bloodkit?" She prompted softly, her voice smooth like honey.

Bloodkit stared at her, his eyes wide. "Is... Is this StarClan?" He breathed. The red tabby dipped her head in response. His blood froze. "A-Am I... Am I dead?" He gasped.

The she-cat purred. "Of course not, little one." She bent over him and licked his head. "You're only dreaming."

Bloodkit couldn't take his eyes off the cat. "You're a StarClan warrior..!" He breathed. "Wow..!"

She let out a soft purr. "And you will one day be a ShadowClan warrior. A brilliant one, too." Bloodkit's heart pounded rapidly in his chest. *A StarClan cat said I'm going to be a warrior! My future is certain!*

"I have a prophecy for you, young one," The she-cat murmured.

Bloodkit's eyes widened, excitement surging through his body. "Really?" He gasped. "For me? A-Are you sure you don't want Depthstar, or Hawkfeather, or Dewstorm? They're the ones-"

"No, dear," She told him. "This prophecy is for you, and you alone."

Bloodkit's eyes were as round as the moon in the sky. He dug his claws into the ground, anxious to hear what this StarClan cat had to say. "I'm listening," He breathed.

The starry she-cat leaned closer to him, touching her muzzle to his ear. "There are shadows of blood all around you, Bloodkit," She whispered. "A darkness is growing. A poison that will spread and destroy your clan from within. Only the spilling of blood will save ShadowClan. Revenge will guide you."

Bloodkit stared at her, the fur along his spine tingling at the ominous message. "The spilling of blood?" He echoed anxiously. "How will that save ShadowClan? Are cats going to die? And revenge? Why would I want revenge?" His paws shook with fear. "Am I going to do something bad?" He whispered. "Am I going to betray my clan? What-"

"Slow down!" The Starclan warrior soothed, brushing her sleek red tail along his shoulder. "Have no fear."

"Can't you tell me more?" Bloodkit asked anxiously.

She shook her head. "I'm afraid not."

He suddenly felt very small and afraid. He flattened his ears. "Then how will I know what to do?" He whimpered.

"You will know what to do when the time comes." The she-cat gazed at him, and he was amazed by the amount of love and compassion in her eyes, as though she'd known him his whole life. "I hope we cross paths again soon." She gazed at him for a moment longer, then stood and turned away.

"Wait!" Bloodkit gasped, taking a step forward and lifting a front paw. "Please, tell me how to save ShadowClan! I don't know what to do! What if I fail you?"

She paused and looked over her shoulder. "You will know what to do when the time comes," She repeated softly. "And you will not fail me." She paused. "I'm so proud of you, Bloodkit," She murmured. "I will always be with you."

She watched as Bloodkit began to fade, returning to the realm of dreamless sleep once more. When he vanished, the she-cat continued through the starlit forest. A gray tabby slowly stepped out of the bushes, his yellow eyes glowing. "He's a fine kit," He murmured. "He's brave and smart, just like you."

The tabby paused for a long moment, then decided to acknowledge the tom. She didn't look at him. "Interesting that you take interest in him *now* , Rainheart," She growled. "If only you had before you

abandoned him."

Rainheart's eyes lit with distress. "Poppywing, I'm sorry..." He rasped, stepping toward her. "I've told you! I couldn't live without you. I needed you."

"And what about Bloodkit?" Poppywing turned to the tabby, her tail lashing. "He needed a father, and you left him! You abandoned our kit!" Her tail drooped. "I never imagined you would do such a thing."

"Poppywing!" He whimpered. "Don't you remember? Remember how excited we were to have kits? We were going to raise them together! I couldn't do that without you. It was against everything we had planned." His yellow eyes lit with sorrow. "I don't regret my decision. I love you more than anything."

"Rainheart," She muttered. "I have nothing left to say to you. You abandoned our son. The cat I fell in love with wouldn't have done that. But I guess I didn't know you as well as I thought I did." She padded away. "Goodbye."

"Poppywing, wait!" He choked, staring after her numbly. "Wait..." When she didn't look back, he lowered his head, his tail drooping.

***

"Swiftkit..."

Swiftkit awoke to murmuring close to his ear. He raised his head, blinking away sleep. He let out a delighted purr. "Maplefur!" He purred and stood up rubbing his head against his father's, a purr rumbling in his throat.

He hadn't seen his father in several days. After the fight with Stonekit, Poisonedsap told them that Maplefur wasn't going to visit them anymore. That had upset Swiftkit until one night, his father came and explained that Poisonedsap ordered him to stay away. But he was able to come at night when Poisonedsap was asleep. Maplefur never woke Stonekit. Only Swiftkit.

"Won't Stonekit want to see you, too?" Swiftkit had asked the first

night his father visited.

Maplefur had hesitated for a moment. "I don't think he would." He'd murmured. "I feel that his loyalty lies with his mother."

Swiftkit missed seeing his father every day. But he was grateful that he came to visit him some nights. Maplefur sat up and Swiftkit stared up at him. "I'm going to be apprenticed tomorrow!" He whispered.

"I know," His father purred.

"Will you watch the ceremony?" Swiftkit asked eagerly. "You'll be there, right?"

"Of course, I will," Maplefur promised, lowering his head and rasping his tongue over Swiftkit's head. "I wouldn't miss it for all the prey in the forest."

The black and white kit purred. "I'll make you proud. I promise."

"I know, you will." His father's eyes shone with affection.

"Maplefur."

Swiftkit nearly jumped out of his fur. Maplefur's fur bristled in shock, and he looked over his shoulder. Swiftkit stared into the shadows of the den, his blue eyes wide.

A pair of amber eyes gleamed in the darkness. "Is that Maplefur? It can't be. I told him to stay away from my kits." Her voice sounded calm. But every word felt like thorns scraping his pelt. Swiftkit pressed himself into his nest, staring at his mother nervously, then flicking his eyes to his father.

Maplefur turned to face her calmly, meeting her gaze. "Nothing will keep me from seeing my kits, Poisonedsap." He growled. Poisonedsap looked at him calmly, and for several heartbeats, neither cat spoke. Maplefur's tail twitched slightly.

After what felt like moons, Poisonedsap stood, dipping her head. "Perhaps I was wrong, Maplefur," She meowed. "They are your kits,

after all." Her eyes glowed. "Shall we go into the forest and discuss this privately? I'm sure we can come to an arrangement." Swiftkit was pleasantly surprised. *She's not mad at him? She might let him see us? That's great!*

Maplefur looked surprised as well. He hesitated, then dipped his head. "Very well."

"Wonderful," Poisonedsap flicked her ragged tail, and rested her eyes on Swiftkit, who tensed. "Go back to sleep, dear," She purred. "Everything will be alright in the morning."

Swiftkit nodded and rested his chin on the moss, watching as his parents left the den. After a few moments, he looked at Stonekit. His brother was still asleep. He turned his head to the other side of the den. Everyone else looked asleep as well. Bloodkit lay curled up against Bloomfire, a soft purr rising from his throat, as if he was having a good dream. Diamondrain and her kits lay together, sound asleep.

He looked toward the mouth of the den, gazing out into the dark clearing. *I wonder what they'll talk about... It would be wrong to eavesdrop... But... I want to hear this..! I'll go.* He decided. He stood up and padded out of the den.

He went out into the clearing and sniffed the air. *Come on...* He thought anxiously when he couldn't smell either of his parents. *Warriors scent things all the time. Like ThunderClan trespassers! I need to learn this!* At last, he picked up Poisonedsap's scent. *Yes!* He quickly followed it, surprised when he found that it wasn't leading toward the thorn tunnel. He knew that some cats were on guard. *Were they trying to avoid them?*

Confused, Swiftkit followed the scent. It led him to a gap in the bushes behind the warrior's den. He looked around nervously. He'd never been in the forest before. It looked big, dark, and full of creatures waiting to jump out at him. He shuddered as a chilly breeze ruffled his fur. He scurried onward through the trees, going deeper and deeper into the territory. He spotted shadows up ahead and froze. *That's them!* He crept forward into the shelter of a bush, peering out from under the leaves.

"This is your last chance, Maplefur," Poisonedsap was growling, stepping in front of him. "Stay away from those kits."

Maplefur looked surprised. "What? You said-"

"I say a lot of things." She growled.

The cream tabby stared at her angrily, his tail swishing back and forth. "How dare you do this? After all I've done for you? You were a rogue, and not just any rogue. You were a member of your brother's gang. Those cats tormented the clans! They attacked warriors and apprentices, even killed some!"

Swiftkit was shocked. *Poisonedsap isn't clanborn?! She was part of a group of horrible rogues?!*

"Your brother was killed," Maplefur went on, glaring at his mate steadily. "And you begged for mercy. You begged us to give you food and shelter. You seemed like a helpless, innocent she-cat. You told us that your brother forced you to attack us."

Poisonedsap narrowed her eyes.

"Our leader then, Stormstar, wanted to have you killed. " He meowed. "But I thought you deserved a chance. I vouched for you. And when every cat in the clan mistrusted you, I was there, and I treated you well." He narrowed his eyes. "And now, you tell me I can't see my own kits anymore. You wouldn't even have them if it weren't for me. You wouldn't *be* here if it weren't for me."

Poisonedsap studied Maplefur for a long moment. "And you have treated me well, Maplefur," She meowed. "And for that, I'm grateful." She let out a soft purr. "But I'm afraid that I don't need you anymore."

The cream furred warrior narrowed his eyes. "Maybe you don't, but the kits do. I love them, and you can't stop me."

"I don't think you do understand." Poisonedsap frowned. "Perhaps I need to elaborate." It was silent for a moment. Then, she let out a snarl and lunged at him.

[image]

Swiftkit let out a gasp, and Maplefur's eyes went wide with alarm. The she-cat pinned him onto his back, leaning in close and baring her teeth at him. "Now do you understand?" She sneered. "I don't need you anymore." She dug her claws into his shoulders. Swiftkit stared, feeling frozen, his eyes round with horror. *No! What are you doing?!*

Maplefur stared up at her, realization lighting his eyes. "You were never a good cat!" He hissed. "You're just like your brother! A cruel, worthless rogue!"

"And you're a fool!" Poisonedsap sneered. "You fell right into my trap, pathetic *warrior*!" Maplefur tried to get up, but she hissed and pinned him back against the ground. "The clans killed my brother. My friends! They took everything from me. So what better way to take out my vengeance than to take everything from them?" She purred. "I will destroy the clans from within."

"You'll never do that!" Maplefur spat under her. "Not alone!"

Poisonedsap's eyes gleamed. "No, not alone. There are plenty of clan cats who will join me. And when we are strong enough, we will destroy the clans."

"No warrior would betray their clan for you!" Maplefur snapped.

"Of course not," She purred. "Fully grown warriors are hard to persuade." She paused. "But kits... They can be taught to believe anything." She narrowed her eyes. "That's why I needed you, Maplefur. You gave me two fine kits who will one day fight alongside me in a final battle against the clans. And you could have given me more. But I obviously can't trust you." Swiftkit's paws trembled. *She wants me to fight the clans?! Never! I'll never betray my clan!*

Maplefur's yellow eyes flared with fury. "Those kits will never be like you! They're going to be loyal clan warriors!"

Poisonedsap's eyes gleamed. "They will be loyal to me, and me

alone," She sneered. "And I'll find another mate, one who wasn't weak and stupid like you. One who will make my future kits strong!" She dug her claws into him. "You could have been a part of it. You could have watched Swiftkit and Stonekit grow up to be the most dangerous cats in the forest. But now, you never will." She raised her paw, claws glinting in the moonlight.

No! Swiftkit gasped in terror.

His father took advantage of the moment and slammed upward into Poisonedsap, throwing her off of him. The dark golden she-cat let out a furious snarl and swung her claws at him, but Maplefur ducked and slashed his claws across her shoulder. Poisonedsap screeched and launched herself at him, rolling him onto his back and digging her hind claws into his spine.

Maplefur yowled and rolled over, throwing a blow to Poisonedsap's muzzle. She snarled and lunged at him once more, aiming her paws at his shoulder and slamming him to the ground. Swiftkit flinched as he heard his father's body thud against the cold earth. The cream tabby tom gasped out as the breath was knocked out of him.

Get up! Swiftkit silently shrieked. *Get up, Maplefur!* Poisonedsap immediately lunged down at his throat.

No! Swiftkit stared in horror, his heart slamming madly against his chest as he watched his mother fasten her teeth into Maplefur's throat. The tom let out a choked cry and pushed his paws against her chest in a weak attempt to save himself, but she bit harder into him, blood running down his neck onto the dark grass.

I have to help him! I have to! Stop! Get off him! Swiftkit's mind screamed at him to do something, but his paws wouldn't move. His blood felt frozen in his veins. Time stood still as he watched his father fight for his life, Poisonedsap holding his throat firmly in her jaws, her ragged tail lashing as she waited for him to stop struggling.

After what felt like forever, Maplefur's paws slowly dropped from her. He went still, the life dying from his wide eyes. Poisonedsap released his throat and raised her head, her eyes gleaming in the

night as she studied him. Blood stained her muzzle. Blood heavily oozed from his father's throat and ran from his mouth, painting the grass crimson beneath him.

Swiftkit finally managed to move. He stumbled back dizzily. *I...I have to... get to camp... I have to warn them... I... Maplefur...* He staggered aside, then ran as fast as he could, feeling blind with shock and fear. Numb with grief for his father. *I have to warn them about Poisonedsap!*

https://youtu.be/NGzpXBIxPnE

Chapter 5

[image]

Swiftkit woke up cold and wet. He blinked open his eyes, shivering. *Why is the nursery-* He snapped out of his thoughts and looked around in surprise. He was in the forest. It was dawn. He looked up shakily through the pine branches at the lavender-and-gold sky. Dewdrops glistened among the grass. *What am I doing here..?* He wondered anxiously, rising to his paws.

With a start, he remembered the events of last night. *Maplefur is dead... Poisonedsap killed him...* He hung his head, letting out a whimper as grief swelled up his heart. *I need to tell the clan what she's planning!* He wondered what had stopped him last night. He couldn't quite remember. He could only recall running through the forest on his way to camp. *I must have fainted.* He realized. *I was in a lot of shock, and afraid...*

He looked toward the camp miserably. *It's too late, now! Poisonedsap has probably returned to camp...* He tensed. *What if she knows I saw her kill Maplefur?* He wondered in alarm.

"Swiftkit? What are you doing out of the nursery?"

It was as if his thought had come to life. Swiftkit spun around, looking up anxiously. Poisonedsap stood a few fox-lengths from

him, studying him closely.

"I-I-I" He swallowed, lost for words. *I can't let her know that I saw!*

But his mother seemed to see right through him. "Swiftkit," She growled. "I'm sorry you had to see that." She stepped toward him.

Swiftkit staggered backwards, lowering himself to the ground. "W-Why?" He managed to choke out. "Why did you do it?"

"Maplefur was holding you back."

"No!" Swiftkit cried. "He wasn't! He was my dad, and you killed him!" His paws trembled, yet he felt braver than ever. He raised his head to his mother, struggling to keep his voice from shaking. "I'm going to tell the clan what you did," He rasped. "and you'll be exiled."

"Oh, Swiftkit," Poisonedsap purred. "You wouldn't exile your own mother. And do you really think the clan will believe the wild imagination of a kit?" Her black tipped tail twitched as she fixed her amber eyes on him. "They will never know the truth."

Swiftkit stared at her, his ears flattening. His heart pounded with fear. "Are you going to kill me, too?" He whimpered.

For a moment, she looked genuinely startled. "I would never kill you," She meowed. "You're my kit."

He stared at her, wondering if he could believe that. His fur bristled nervously as she approached him and lowered her head, rasping her tongue over his head. It was usually a comforting gesture. But Poisonedsap's tongue felt as dangerous as though a thorn bush was being raked over his head. Just as Swiftkit began to calm, she touched her brown muzzle to his ear. "If you tell any cat what you saw," She murmured. "I'll kill every cat in the nursery." His blood turned to ice as she went on. "Diamondrain, Mistykit, Coldkit, Bloomfire... And your friend, Bloodkit."

"You can't," Swiftkit dared to say. "You're not strong enough to take on both queens."

Poisonedsap's eyes gleamed as she sat down. "Who said I was doing it alone? I have been in ShadowClan for many moons. I have made allies."

Swiftkit's eyes widened. *Was it possible that there were* more *traitors in ShadowClan aware of Poisonedsap's monstrous plot for revenge?*

"Be mindful of who you trust, dear," Poisonedsap meowed softly. "I know I am." She studied him for a moment. "Don't forget what I told you. They will die." With that, she turned away.

After a while, Swiftkit slumped onto his stomach, letting out a moan. *Why did I have to see her kill him? Why did I have to be Poisonedsap's kit? Why is this happening to me? Everyone's in danger now, and it's my fault!* For a moment, he considered running. He didn't know where he would go. He just knew that he wanted to get as far away from Poisonedsap as possible. Somewhere safe. Somewhere where no cat would get hurt because of what he'd seen.

He was about to finalize this decision when something stopped him. *If no cat finds out about Poisonedsap... Her plot might be successful. The clans will be destroyed. All my clanmates, all my friends, will die.* He narrowed his ice-blue eyes. *I have to stay. If not for me, then for them. I need to protect my clan. I will find a way.*

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The sun was high in the sky. Bloodkit had been awake for a while now. He rolled a ball of moss under his paw. "Okay, ready?" He prompted.

"Ready!" Mistykit and Coldkit chirped in harmony, staring at him eagerly.

Bloodkit bat the moss ball, and the two gray kits squealed with excitement, bounding after it. He let out a purr of amusement. As he watched the kits play, he began to reflect on his dream. *I met a StarClan cat!* He thought excitedly. *I'll bet no cat in the clan had a night nearly as interesting as I did!* Then his excitement faded to anxiety as he thought of the prophecy she had given him.

"A darkness is growing. A poison that will spread and destroy your clan from within. Only the spilling of blood will save Shadowclan. Revenge will guide you." He shuddered. *I wish I knew what she meant... It sounds like something terrible is going to happen, and StarClan approves! The "spilling of blood" will save ShadowClan. But whose blood? Who is going to die?*

"Bloodkit!" Mistykit's yowl broke him out of his thoughts, and he returned to reality to see the moss ball soaring toward his head. He shot up into the air just in time, swatting the ball back at the kits.

He watched Mistykit and Coldkit play for a moment, then looked to the other side of the den. Poisonedsap lay in her nest relaxing, her eyes narrowed to slits as she purred contently. Stonekit was studying his claws, one black forepaw raised, his tail waving eagerly. "I'm going to be the fiercest warrior the forest has ever seen!" He boasted.

Bloodkit ignored him and looked at Swiftkit. He was sitting by the mouth of the den, looking into the clearing with his back to him. With a purr, Bloodkit bounded over to him. "You're going to be an apprentice today!" He purred, bumping his shoulder to his.

"Huh?" Swiftkit seemed distracted. "Oh, yeah. I forgot."

Bloodkit tilted his head. He didn't seem right. He sounded tired, and almost depressed. "Aren't you excited?"

"I guess," Swiftkit murmured.

He was startled to hear his friend so down, especially today. *He's starting his warrior training! This is what we've been waiting for!*

Bloodkit forced a purr, trying to cheer him up. "I bet you'll be the greatest warrior the forest has ever seen."

He didn't respond for a moment. "Thanks."

Bloodkit studied him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Something's obviously-"

Swiftkit swung his head to him. "I said, nothings wrong!" He snapped, and Bloodkit jumped back, staring at him in shock. A heartbeat later, his blue eyes lit with guilt. "I'm sorry," He rasped, looking down again. "I just want to be alone."

Surprised and hurt, he turned away, heading back to Bloomfire and Diamondrain. He saw Poisonedsap eying him out of the corner of his eye. *Relax, fleabag.* He thought sourly. *I'll stay away from your kit.* He couldn't help but be offended by Swiftkit's behaviour. *Was it something I said or did?*

"Where in StarClan's name is Maplefur?"

Bloodkit twitched his ear and looked over his shoulder. Through the branches of the den, he saw his father and Copperstripe speaking to Cobratail. It was Copperstripe who had spoken. Their apprentices, Stripedpaw and Song, sat near them, exchanging excited looks.

Cobratail flicked his tail. "Wasn't he with you? He said he would help you assess the apprentices."

"Yes," Flameheart meowed. "But he never showed up."

"We waited a while for him," Copperstripe added. "But the apprentices were ready to explode. We couldn't wait any longer. And when we came back after the assessment to talk to him, he wasn't even in his den!"

"He must be out hunting." The clan deputy huffed out a sigh. "I'll speak to him about it when he returns to camp." He turned his head as Depthstar padded to his side.

"I trust the apprentices passed their assessments?" The dark tom prompted.

"We did!" Stripedpaw purred. "And you should have seen Song! She caught a thrush so high in the air!"

The white she-cat ducked her head, looking embarrassed. "It was nothing." She paused, looking around. "Has Boost finished his

assessment?"

"Yeah!" A heartbeat later, the young tabby shot through the thorn tunnel, hurdling into his sister. His mentor, Milkblaze, followed more slowly. "Great StarClan, Boost!" The two littermates broke into a playful fight while Stripedpaw watched in amusement.

Depthstar frowned. "Perhaps you two aren't ready to be warriors? You look like kits to me." Boost and Song immediately leaped apart, their eyes lighting with protest, and the clan leader purred in amusement. "I'm only teasing." His blue eyes shone. "Are you ready to become warriors?"

"Yes!" The apprentices exclaimed.

"Wonderful," Depthstar purred. "Then I shall call a meeting." He paused, looking at his deputy. "Poisonedsap's kits are six moons, aren't they?"

"Yes, Depthstar," Cobratail nodded.

"Then I shall hold an apprentice ceremony as well as a warrior ceremony." The dark furred tom leaped up onto the meeting rock. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the rock for a clan meeting!"

Bloodkit heard Swiftkit whimper, and he immediately returned to his friend's side. "What's the matter?" He demanded anxiously.

Swiftkit lowered his head. "Maplefur should be here," He whispered. "He said he'd be here..."

Bloodkit blinked. "I'm sure he'll return to camp soon. He wouldn't miss your ceremony."

"Come, now!" Poisonedsap padded over to Swiftkit, wrapping her tail around him and forcing Bloodkit to leave his side. "It's time for your training to begin!"

"Yeah!" Stonekit exclaimed excitedly. "This is our moment!"

Bloodkit watched as Poisonedsap led her kits out of the nursery to

join the cats gathering beneath the rock. Bloomfire stepped to his side, and he looked up at her. "Can we join them?" He asked hopefully.

His mother purred. "Of course."

Bloodkit eagerly ran to join Swiftkit, but Poisonedsap glared at him, flicking her tail. "Swiftkit and Stonekit are becoming apprentices, not *you,*" She growled.

He stepped back warily, and Bloomfire sat beside him. "Take no notice of her," She murmured. "She rarely has nice things to say to any cat."

"Today is a great day for ShadowClan," Depthstar began. "I have the privilege of naming three new warriors and two new apprentices. We are lucky to have so many warriors, especially with leaf-bare coming."

A tail flicked his shoulder, and Bloodkit jumped, turning to see his father settling beside him and purring a greeting. He looked up as his parents touched muzzles before Flameheart turned his attention to the meeting, his eyes fixed proudly on his apprentice.

"I, Depthstar, leader of ShadowClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these three apprentices." Depthstar meowed. "They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn." Bloodkit peered between Cliffshade and Crowmask to see the apprentices. The three young cats gazed up at their leader eagerly.

Depthstar rested his gaze on the first apprentice. "Stripedpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do." The tortoiseshell tom stood tall and proud, gazing up at his leader.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Stripedpaw, from this moment you will be known as Stripednose." Bloodkit immediately understood why Depthstar had chosen that

name. The tom had a pink nose with a black marking across one nostril. It suited him.

"StarClan honors your courage and loyalty, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ShadowClan." He paused as the clan began to chant.

"Stripednose! Stripednose!"

The dappled tom raised his head proudly, his tail waving back and fourth. Song purred and rubbed her muzzle against his shoulder. "Stripednose!" She yowled above the others. Stripednose purred and licked her head. *It looks like there'll be more kits in the nursery soon.* Bloodkit thought. *Even though they're young, they're already very close.*

Depthstar raised his tail, gesturing for the clan to stop, and they quieted. "Boost, Song," He meowed. "You joined ShadowClan as rogues and chose not to take clan names when you were apprenticed. Do you wish to take warrior names?"

The two cats exchanged a look. After a moment, they returned their attention to their leader. "I wish to keep my name, Depthstar," Boost dipped his head. "I like being called Boost. It was the name my mother gave me. I cannot give it up."

Depthstar gave a respectful nod. "Very well." He moved his gaze to his sister. "Song?"

The white she-cat hesitated, turning her head to Stripednose. "Would you mind?" She asked quietly.

"Of course not," The tortoiseshell warrior purred, his eyes shining. "I love you no matter what you're called." She purred and sat against him, twining her tail with his.

Depthstar coughed, and the couple broke apart, looking embarrassed. "Now then," The clan leader went on. "Boost, Song, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," Song meowed, and her brother echoed her.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I name you both warriors. StarClan honors your determination and enthusiasm, and we welcome you as full warriors of ShadowClan."

"Boost! Song!" The clan cheered. Depthstar leaped down from the rock to rest his chin on each warrior's head, and in turn, received a lick on the shoulder. Boost puffed out his chest proudly while Song and Stripednose purred together. Bloodkit watched the three new warriors. *That'll be me one day.* He thought eagerly. *A real ShadowClan warrior!*

"Now, It's also time for two kits to begin their training," Depthstar meowed, peering across the clearing. "Stonekit, Swiftkit, come here."

Bloodkit watched as Stonekit ran through the crowd to stand below the rock, staring up at Depthstar eagerly. Swiftkit followed more slowly. *What's up with him?* Bloodkit wondered. *I would be ready to explode if I were in his paws!*

"Swiftkit, Stonekit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. Swiftkit, from this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Swiftpaw."

Swiftpaw stared up at Depthstar, his tail flicking back and forth. Depthstar looked into the crowd of warriors. "Timberstorm, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You had received excellent training from Crowmask, and you have shown yourself to be wise and loyal. I expect you to pass on all you know to Swiftpaw." The tabby warrior dipped his head and stepped toward his new apprentice. Swiftpaw touched noses with him. Poisonedsap watched, nodding in approval.

"Swiftpaw! Swiftpaw!" The clan chanted. Bloodkit leaped to his paws. "Swiftpaw!" He cheered, ready to burst with excitement for his friend. But Swiftpaw didn't look very happy. Bloodkit looked around the clearing and immediately understood. *Maplefur wasn't here...*

"Now," Depthstar began. "Stonekit-"

"Depthstar! Depthstar!"

Every cat looked to the thorn tunnel in alarm as two warriors raced into the camp, panting.

"Ashcloud? Blackstorm?" Depthstar seemed to sense that something was wrong. "What is it?" Bloodkit stared at the warriors as they caught their breath. *How far did they run?* He wondered.

"It's Maplefur," Blackstorm swallowed. "He's dead!" As he spoke, a third warrior, Cougarfoot, padded through the thorn tunnel, carrying a limp cream tabby on his shoulders. The clearing erupted in horrified gasps and cries, but none louder then the yowl that rose from Poisonedsap's lungs.

"No!" She screeched and ran to him, thrusting her way through the crowd. "Get out of my way!" She spat. Cougarfoot lowered Maplefur's body to the ground, and Poisonedsap let out a wail of grief, crouching and pressing her muzzle into his fur.

Bloodkit stared at Maplefur's body in horror. A nasty wound split his throat, dry blood clinging to the fur around it. His yellow eyes were open and sightless. Blackstorm quietly stepped forward and closed them with his tail.

Poisonedsap raised her head. "Don't touch him!" She spat, and the black tom dipped his head, stepping back to give her room to grieve.

"Maplefur..." Stonekit was staring at his father's body in shock, and for the first time, Bloodkit wondered if the aggressive kit had feelings after all. He saw Swiftpaw hanging his head, unable to look at the body.

"Swiftpaw," Bloodkit hurried over to join the black and white apprentice beneath the meeting rock. He hesitated before pressing his pelt against his. "I'm so sorry!" Swiftpaw didn't respond, seeming lost in grief.

"Cougarfoot," Depthstar padded over to the others slowly, stopping near the dead warrior. "What happened?"

The golden brown tom sat down, staring at Maplefur. "We were patrolling by the ThunderClan border, and... We found him, just a fox length into their territory. His body was cold. There's ThunderClan scent all over him."

Bloodkit felt Swiftpaw stiffen. "*What*?" He breathed.

Poisonedsap raised her head, letting out a furious snarl. "A ThunderClan warrior killed my mate!"

The clearing exploded into outraged yowls.

"Murderers!"

"ThunderClan fox-dung!"

Stonekit let out a growl, digging his claws into the ground. "ThunderClan!"

"Enough!" Depthstar yowled, and the clan quieted, looking at him anxiously. "We have no proof that-"

"Proof?" Poisonedsap echoed furiously, glaring at him. "Maplefur was found right on their land! There's ThunderClan scent on him! Clearly this is the work of ThunderClan!"

The clan leader narrowed his eyes. "What reason would ThunderClan have to kill Maplefur?"

"What reason do you have to not defend his honor?" Poisonedsap retorted, and the clan began murmuring. "Maplefur died at the paws of a ThunderClan warrior! We must attack at once!"

"We will not attack ThunderClan until-"

Poisonedsap stood up and faced him. "What kind of a leader are you to let cats get away with murder?" She spat. "Have you no honor?" Some cats gasped in shock that she would say such a thing to her own leader, while others were murmuring agreement.

"Depthstar, ThunderClan can't get away with this!" Blackstorm exclaimed.

"Right!" Mottledpaw yowled. "Maplefur must be avenged!"

Depthstar was narrowing his eyes at Poisonedsap, his thick tail lashing slowly. She wasn't backing down, her amber eyes fixed on him. After a moment, the tom drew in a deep breath. "You're in grief, Poisonedsap," He meowed calmly. "I understand. I will confront Strawberrystar with this accusation at the next gathering."

"The next gathering?" Poisonedsap bristled. "That's-"

Cougarfoot padded to her side. "Depthstar knows what he's doing," He murmured. "Maplefur will be avenged. I promise."

Poisonedsap glared at the golden warrior for a moment, and Bloodkit wondered if she would yell at him, too. But her fur flattened. "I suppose." She leaned against him. "Thank you for bringing him back to camp, Cougarfoot." The tom dipped his head. After a moment, Poisonedsap looked to the clan leader. "May we continue with Stonekit's ceremony?" She rasped.

Depthstar frowned. "Surely we should hold Maplefur's vigil first-"

"No," She interrupted. "Stonekit must be made an apprentice now, with his brother. That's what Maplefur would want."

After a moment of hesitation, Depthstar dipped his head. "Very well." He returned to the meeting rock. It took a moment for the clan to focus on the ceremony, shaken by the news of Maplefur's death.

"Stonekit," The clan leader went on. Hawkfeather and Dewstorm groomed Maplefur's body quietly while he spoke. "From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as-"

"Wait!" Stonekit yowled.

Several cats gasped, and Bloodkit blinked at the white tom kit. *What is he doing?! He can't interrupt the clan leader like that!* Beside him, Swiftpaw looked startled, staring at his brother.

Depthstar twitched his ear. "Yes, Stonekit?"

The black-legged tom straightened. He fixed his amber eyes on his leader. "My father has died wrongfully at the paws of a rival warrior," He meowed. "I wish to avenge him. I will find the ThunderClan warrior who sent him to StarClan and tear him apart." He raised his chin. "I would like to be called Revengepaw. For I will act out my revenge. For my father."

Revengepaw? Bloodkit stared at him in disbelief. *What a strange name... What an ominous name...* The clan murmured, surprised.

Depthstar looked startled. He exchanged an uncertain look with his deputy, before returning his gaze to Stonekit. "That's a worrisome name, Stonekit," He meowed quietly. "One that may give a poor impression to your clanmates. To the other clans. It may make them wary of you."

"It is the name that will give me strength." Stonekit gazed at his leader steadily.

The dark tom studied him for a long moment. "Very well." He cleared his throat. "From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Revengepaw. Your mentor will be-"

"Depthstar," Poisonedsap dipped her head. "I have a request."

Another interruption? Bloodkit thought in disbelief. *What now?*

The clan leader bristled for a moment, clearly irritated that this ceremony was taking so long. "Yes, Poisonedsap?" He meowed impatiently.

"I would like Cougarfoot to mentor Revengepaw," She meowed. Beside her, Cougarfoot looked at her in surprise.

Depthstar twitched his ear. "Cougarfoot already has an apprentice," He reminded her.

The golden brown she-cat snorted. "Mottledpaw is being assessed tomorrow," She pointed out, casting the warrior a warm look. "Surely a strong, handsome warrior like Cougarfoot can handle two apprentices for one day?"

Cougarfoot twitched his black tipped tail. "I suppose I could."

Depthstar hesitated. "Very well," He decided quietly. "Cougarfoot, you will mentor Revengepaw. I expect you to pass on all you know to him."

Cougarfoot padded over to Revengepaw, who eagerly touched noses with the compact warrior. Bloodkit looked at Poisonedsap, expecting to see her gaze on her son. But instead, her eyes were all for his mentor. *Surely she isn't thinking of taking another mate, so soon after Maplefur's death?* He wondered.

"Revengepaw! Revengepaw!" The clan yowled as the black and white tom looked around, puffing out his chest proudly.

"Revengepaw..." Swiftpaw muttered. "What a name..."

Bloodkit nodded in agreement. Suddenly, his mind flashed back to the message the StarClan cat had given him. *"Revenge will guide you..." Could that have something to do with Revengepaw?*

Chapter 6

[image]

"Bloodkit! Look at me!" Mistykit squeaked as she leaped into the air. "Look how high I can jump!"

He let out a purr of amusement. "Be careful! If you jump any higher, your head is going to pop through the roof of the den!"

Coldkit shouldered his sister aside, puffing out his chest. "I bet I can jump higher!" He boasted. "I'll be able to catch every bird in the forest!"

The light gray she-kit leaped to her paws. "Will not!"

"Will too!"

As the kits began to bicker, Bloodkit's attention turned to the clearing. Outside of the den, he saw Swiftpaw padding across the clearing to the elders den, holding a wad of wet moss in his jaws. Suddenly, Revengepaw rushed past him, shoving his brother aside. "Race you!" He mumbled around the moss he was carrying. Swiftpaw purred and bounded after him.

Bloodkit looked away, his heart sinking. Two moons ago, Swiftpaw had become an apprentice. He'd promised to visit him when he could. But his old friend hadn't said a word to him since. Bloodkit tried to tell himself that Swiftpaw was just busy with his training, but he couldn't help but feel like the black and white apprentice had forgotten him.

Maybe we aren't even friends anymore. Bloodkit thought miserably. He missed having Swiftpaw in the nursery. However, on the bright side, Poisonedsap had returned to her warrior duties, and somehow the nursery felt safer without her. Bloomfire and Diamondrain seemed relieved to have her gone too.

He saw the newest warrior, Mottledface, rush by the nursery toward

the apprentices. "Hey, Revengepaw!" He called. "Wanna go practice some battle moves?"

The big white apprentice's eyes gleamed, his tail twitching. "Yeah!" He turned to his brother. "Come on!"

"Bloodkit!"

He faintly heard Mistykit call out his name, but was still distracted. Something touched him and he snapped out of his thoughts, turning to see that his mother had rested her tail on his shoulder, looking at him with concern. "Are you alright?"

As Coldkit and Mistykit began to play together, Bloodkit looked down. "Swiftpaw doesn't talk to me. I don't think he wants to be my friend anymore."

Bloomfire's green eyes softened with sympathy. "I'm sure that's not true." She rasped her tongue over his head. "Swiftpaw is an apprentice now. He has more duties and responsibilities." She paused. "You'll be seeing each other more often soon enough."

He blinked, tilting his head. "What do you mean?"

The orange she-cat let out an amused purr. "Don't tell me you've forgotten! You're being apprenticed today!"

Bloodkit's heart nearly shot up his throat as he remembered. *Today's the day! I'm going to start training to be a warrior!* "I am!" He squeaked out. "Yes!"

"What?" Coldkit and Mistykit leaped apart, their gray fur fluffing up as they stared at Bloodkit with wide eyes. They raced at him, and he let out a startled purr as they tackled him. "Don't go!" Mistykit wailed, pawing at his back while her brother pounced on his tail.

"Who's going to play with us?" Coldkit protested. "We need you!" He sprang onto his back, nipping his ear.

Mistykit pressed her muzzle into his fur. "We'll be lonely!"

Bloodkit gently pushed them away, stumbling to his feet and

shaking scraps of moss from his pelt, touched by their words. He hadn't realized how much he meant to them. "Don't worry, I'll still be around!" He paused. "I'll visit you as often as I can, and show you everything I learn."

"You promise?" The kits stared at him.

"I promise." *And I'll keep that promise.* Bloodkit added silently. *Unlike Swiftpaw...*

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the rock for a clan meeting!"

Bloodkit froze at Depthstar's yowl from the clearing. *It's time! Oh, StarClan, it's time!* Bloomfire let out a purr, and he turned to see Flameheart poke his head into the den.

"Depthstar is ready," He meowed, his eyes gleaming as he gazed at his son. Bloodkit felt ready to explode with excitement. *I'm going to be an apprentice! I'm going to train to be a warrior!* He started toward Flameheart.

"Come here!" His mother gasped, pulling him close with a white paw, beginning to lap at his red tabby fur. "Your fur is a mess!"

"Okay, okay!" Bloodkit squeaked, pulling away. "I have to go!"

Flameheart let out a purr. "He looks fine, Bloomfire." He turned away, waving his ginger tabby tail. "Are you ready, Bloodkit?"

"Of course!" Bloodkit bounded after him eagerly, his mother rising to her paws and following.

"Goodbye!" Coldkit squeaked after him, and Mistykit added, "You'll be the best apprentice ever!"

Yes! I will be! Bloodkit puffed his chest out, suddenly full of confidence as he exited the den. *I'll focus really hard, and I'll be the greatest warrior Shadowclan's ever-*

Ah!

He froze. The whole clan was gathered in the clearing, looking at the meeting rock. Depthstar stood atop it, his glossy blue-black pelt shining under the sun. Cobratail sat on the smaller rock beside him, his tail curled neatly around his paws, muscles rippling under his black and red fur. Outside of the medicine den, Hawkfeather and Dewstorm sat, looking at their leader. Several cats turned their heads to look at Bloodkit, and he tensed under their gaze.

"Bloodkit," Depthstar called. "Come forward."

He jumped a little as Flameheart nudged him with his muzzle. "Go on," He prompted softly. Bloodkit swallowed and slowly began to pad forward through the crowd. He felt as though their eyes were burning into him.

"It's that one," Ashcloud murmured to Greenpine.

Crowmask twitched his ear. "Bloodkit."

"What do you think of him?" Foxshadow whispered to Cliffshade, who growled. "I think Hawkfeather's right."

Bloodkit's pelt burned. He hurried past them and stood beneath the meeting rock, his paws trembling. Suddenly, he was terrified. *The clan hates me! I was okay when I had Flameheart, Bloomfire, and Swiftpaw to like me. But I didn't think about this! If I'm going to train to be a warrior, I'll have to face them!*

"Bloodkit," Depthstar spoke, and he tensed, nervously looking up at his leader. "You have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed."

"Is this a good idea?" Some cat whispered behind him.

"It could be a mistake to train him."

Bloodkit tucked his tail between his legs, feeling small and afraid. His fur stood on end like pine needles. *They all hate me! Why? What did I do wrong? Just tell me what I did wrong!* He felt like breaking down.

"He's going to make a fine apprentice."

He was surprised to hear the meow come from near the medicine den, and looked it nervously. Dewstorm had spoken, his yellow eyes friendly. "And an even better warrior." The tom almost sounded sympathetic, and Bloodkit wondered if he could see how scared he was. Hawkfeather cast his apprentice a narrowed look. *Hawkfeather doesn't agree.* Bloodkit thought. *But at least Dewstorm seems to like me...*

"Bloodkit? Are you alright?"

He jumped a little at Depthstar's meow, and looked up at him nervously. "Y-Yes, Depthstar." He tried to sound confident.

The blackish tom studied him for a moment, then went on. "Bloodkit, from this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Bloodpaw." He looked into the crowd of cats. Bloodpaw swallowed. *Who will my mentor be? Will he like me? Or she? The entire clan seems to hate me, so why wouldn't my mentor?*

"Brownstripe, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You had received excellent training from Greenpine, and I expect you to pass on all you know to Bloodpaw."

Bloodpaw turned around to face the clan, wondering which warrior Brownstripe was. He wasn't sure if he'd seen him before. A young brown tabby stepped forward, fixing his yellow eyes on his new apprentice. He was unable to read Brownstripe's emotions. He nervously padded forward and stretched up to touch noses with him. "I'll do my best," He mewed warily.

The warrior twitched his ear. "I know you will."

"Bloodpaw!" Flameheart started the chant from across the clearing,. Bloomfire and Dewstorm joined in. "Bloodpaw!"

Bloodpaw's fur prickled as he realized that the rest of the clan wasn't joining in, but quietly murmuring to each other. *I can't believe it! They won't even-*

"Bloodpaw! Bloodpaw!"

He heard Swiftpaw's voice and spun in it's direction. The black and

white apprentice was sitting with Revengepaw and Mottledface, his blue eyes gleaming with excitement. *He's saying my name! Maybe he still likes me after all!* The clan joined in more hesitantly. Bloodpaw looked toward the medicine den nervously.

Dewstorm gave him a nod of approval. But beside him, Hawkfeather's narrow eyes were fixed on Bloodpaw, his tail twitching. The brown tom murmured something to his apprentice before turning away and padding into his den. Dewstorm flashed him a glare before following. Bloodpaw stared after the medicine cats. *I wonder what Hawkfeather has against me. What did I ever do?*

"Bloodpaw!"

He heard his mother call out to him and turned just as she and Flameheart reached him. He purred as Bloomfire nuzzled him. "You're an apprentice now. I'm so proud of you!"

Flameheart rested his tail over Bloodpaw's shoulder. "You're going to learn so much," He purred. "You might be a better warrior than I am."

"Never!" Bloodpaw exclaimed warmly.

"Hey, Bloodpaw!"

He turned to see Swiftpaw bounding over to him, and his parents padded away. "This is great!" Swiftpaw purred, nudging him playfully. "We'll be able to train together!"

Bloodpaw couldn't help but feel surprised at his excitement. "I-I wasn't sure you wanted to hang around me anymore," He admitted. "You haven't spoken to me in moons."

Surprise flashed in Swiftpaw's eyes. "What? Of course I do! The only reason I didn't talk to you was because-" He suddenly paused, looking over his shoulder.

Bloodpaw blinked and followed his gaze. Poisonedsap, Mottledface, and Revengepaw were sitting by the thorn bushes, watching Swiftpaw closely. "Swiftpaw?" He prompted.

"Huh?" The black and white tom snapped his attention to Bloodpaw. "Yeah, I-I've been really busy with my training."

"Oh." He couldn't help but feel that Swiftpaw was hiding something. Especially with the way he'd hesitated and looked at his kin and Mottledface before answering. "So... We're still friends?"

"Of course," Swiftpaw purred.

"Well, Bloodpaw," Brownstripe padded forward, twitching his tail. "Are you ready to go see our territory?"

His heart leaped with excitement. "Yes!"

"Come on, then," The warrior turned away, heading for the thorn tunnel.

"Have fun!" Swiftpaw called as Bloodpaw bounded after his mentor.

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"Wow..." Bloodpaw looked around, eyes wide as he took in his surroundings. He was amazed. Pine trees stretched toward the sky, their branches crisscrossing and locking together. The earth felt moist and cool under his pads, layered with pine needles. A million scents filled his nose. Some ShadowClan scent, some mud, some prey... It felt so different from the camp. It felt alive. But with a different type of life, not like that within the camp.

He crouched, sniffing the moist ground. "I smell prey!" He gasped, looking up at his mentor. "I think it's frog, isn't it? Let me catch-"

"Slow down, Bloodpaw," Brownstripe looked amused. "You'll learn about hunting soon enough. Today I'm just going to show you around the territory and where the borders are."

"Oh, okay," He tried to hide his disappointment. *I guess it's still cool to see the territory...*

***

Brownstripe spent a long while showing Bloodpaw around

ShadowClan's territory. He was shown the best places to hunt and find moss, as well as Carrionplace. "Never come here for food," His mentor had warned. "In the past, terrible sickness has been spread to ShadowClan by just one cat bringing back those rats. Many cats die from it."

Bloodpaw followed his mentor, beginning to feel bored and tired from walking. *I wonder what Swiftpaw's up to right now...* Brownstripe suddenly stopped, and Bloodpaw nearly bumped into him. He stumbled back before he could, and looked ahead. A strange looking tree stood ahead of them. It had an absence of leaves and bore strange dark streaks along its trunk.

"What's wrong with that tree?" He asked curiously.

"That's the Burnt Sycamore," Brownstripe meowed. "It looks that way because many generations ago, it was struck by lightning. It doesn't grow leaves anymore." He paused. "We'll come here often at night. It's where apprentices are taught to hunt quietly."

"Okay."

His mentor began to pad onward. "Now, there's one more thing I want to show you today."

Bloodpaw followed him, and it wasn't long before they reached it. He froze and stared at it, wide eyed. A wide black path stretched out in front of him. It reeked of a horrible scent Bloodpaw couldn't identify, and ran into the horizon. He couldn't tell what the path was made of. It wasn't earth. It looked more like some sort of stone.

"What-" Bloodpaw broke off as a snarling sound grew louder and louder as it neared. He looked down the path and froze. Something with huge black paws and glaring yellow eyes was headed for them, faster than anything he'd ever seen. "It's going to get me!" He shrieked and shrunk back as it neared.

A rush of hot air slammed against his face as the creature roared at him, giving off a harsh smell. He pressed himself to the ground, letting out a terrified cry. But the creature ignored him, continuing along the path until it was quiet again. For a moment, Bloodpaw

was frozen, his yellow eyes as round as moons, his fur fluffed up. His heart pounded madly against his chest. "W-What was that?!" He choked out.

"This is the thunderpath," Brownstripe purred, sounding amused. "And what you just saw was a monster. Twolegs sit in their bellies to get to other places."

"What?" Bloodpaw shakily stood, slowly relaxing. "They just let the monsters eat them? Why?"

Brownstripe shrugged. "Who knows why twolegs do anything? They're weird. I suppose the monster gets food, and the twolegs get where they need to go, so it's a win-win."

Bloodpaw stared at the thunderpath nervously. "Do the monsters ever attack the clan?"

"No," His mentor purred. "They never leave the thunderpath." He paused. "Now, what can you smell?"

"Something really bad from that monster," Bloodpaw meowed.

"Besides that." He twitched his tail. "Anything else?"

Bloodpaw scented the air again, trying to ignore the foul scent of the thunderpath. After a few moments, he picked up the scent of cats. It reminded him of ShadowClan's scent, but it was different... "I smell cats." Bloodpaw paused thoughtfully. "Oh!" His ears pricked. "Is this a border? Is that the scent of another clan?"

"Very good." Brownstripe praised. "This is the ThunderClan border, and that, obviously, is ThunderClan scent." He paused. "This is also where Maplefur's body was found."

Bloodpaw lowered his head, saddened by the mention of Swiftpaw's father, a warrior who had shown him kindness and respect. "Did ThunderClan cats really kill him?" He asked quietly.

The brown tabby twitched his ear. "Depthstar is going to bring it up at the gathering tonight."

He blinked. "Why hasn't he brought it up yet?"

"He was still gathering evidence, and deciding whether or not it was a rogue," Brownstripe meowed. "But Maplefur was found right on their side of the thunderpath, with ThunderClan scent on his fur. There's no question."

Bloodpaw was thoughtful. "Is that enough to accuse ThunderClan? I mean-"

His mentor looked at him, narrowing his eyes. "Do you think it's acceptable for our warriors to be murdered, Bloodpaw?" He growled.

He was startled by this question. "Of course not!"

Brownstripe stared at him for a moment, then looked away. "I was a kit when Boost and Song were taken into the clan." He meowed. "Their mother abandoned them outside of the camp."

"I know," Bloodpaw meowed. "Bloomfire told me."

"Ah," Brownstripe dipped his head. "But do you know that they had another sibling? A brother?"

"Really?" He stared at him, surprised. "What happened to him?"

Brownstripe looked away as he spoke. "His name was Deserve. Me and my brothers, Blackstorm and Snakekit, would tease them a little, you know? What kits do." He narrowed his yellow eyes. "Deserve took it too seriously. He killed Snakekit. Deserve ran away, and no cat ever saw him again."

Bloodpaw's blood froze. "A kit?" He whispered.

"Yes." Brownstripe fixed his eyes on him. "He was only a kit. He seemed completely innocent. However, I've learned that size and age doesn't matter. Any cat can be dangerous." His eyes stayed firmly on Bloodpaw.

Bloodpaw shifted his paws, growing uncomfortable. He almost looked aggressive. *Why does it seem like he's accusing me of*

something..? "I...I'm sorry about your brother."

His mentor held his gaze for a moment longer before narrowing his eyes and looking away, his tail twitching. "Remember," He growled. "No matter who they are... or how young they are... warriors will tear apart any enemy." He flexed his claws. "Do you understand?"

"O-of course," Bloodpaw meowed nervously. *Is he trying to scare me..?*

"Good." Brownstripe drew in a deep breath. "Come on. I'll show you the WindClan border." He turned away, and Bloodpaw followed more slowly, shaken by his mentor's words. *Does he think I would kill a cat..?*

Allegiance Update 1

Shadowclan

Leader: Depthstar - Very dark blue-gray tom with a lighter front left paw, dark blue eyes.

Deputy: Cobratail - Mottled dark red and black tabby tom with amber eyes.

Medicine Cat: Hawkfeather - Spotted brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.
Apprentice, Dewstorm

Warriors

Crowmask - Black tom with amber eyes.

Greenpine - Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Ashcloud - Dark gray and white tom with pale green eyes.

Rosebreeze - Creamy ginger tabby she-cat with pale amber eyes.

Milkblaze - White tom with creamy points, pale yellow eyes.

Cougarfoot - Golden brown tom with a white muzzle, black ear tips and tail tip, amber eyes.
Apprentice, Revengepaw

Cliffshade - Dark brown and gray tom with a white underbelly, yellow eyes.

Poisonedsap - Dark golden brown she-cat with dark brown muzzle, throat, nose blaze, black chin, ears, paws, and tail tip, amber eyes.

Bloomfire - Orange she-cat with white paws, muzzle, and chin, dark ginger ears.

Flameheart - Ginger tabby tom with green eyes.

Copperstripe - Dark golden ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Timberstorm - Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.
Apprentice, Swiftpaw

Blackstorm - Black tom with yellow eyes.

Brownstripe - Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.
Apprentice, Bloodpaw

Foxshadow - Black and very dark ginger tom with a bushy tail, dark amber eyes.

Stripednose - Tortoiseshell tom with white paws, chest, and muzzle, black mark on his nose, blue eyes.

Mottledface - Mottled brown tom with amber eyes.

Boost - Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. Former loner.

Song - White she-cat with light blue eyes. Former loner.

Apprentices

Dewstorm - Spotted gray tom with yellow eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Revengepaw- White tom with jet black legs, yellow eyes.

Swiftpaw- Black and white tom with blue eyes.

Bloodpaw- Dark reddish brown tabby tom with a nick in his right ear, yellow eyes.

Queens

Diamondrain - Silver gray she-cat with darker spots, paws, and ears, white chest, muzzle, and chin, light blue eyes. Mother to Crowmask's kits:

Mistykit - Silver-gray she-cat with darker points, light blue eyes.

Coldkit - Dark gray tom with darker points, dark blue eyes.

Elders

Buzzardglare- Dark brown tabby tom with one blind eye, yellow eyes.

Foxshine - Ginger she-cat with yellow eyes.

Carrottail - Orange tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Bluerain - Light blue gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes.

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Thunderclan

Leader: Strawberrystar - Speckled reddish-ginger and cream she-cat with amber eyes.

Deputy: Snowfalcon - Broad shouldered white tom with amber eyes.
Apprentice, Darkpaw

Medicine Cat: Spicewhisker - Small black tom with a white muzzle, tail tip, and front right paw, yellow eyes.

Warriors

Broadwing - Broad shouldered dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.
Apprentice, Batpaw

Oaktuft - Brown and cream tabby tom with amber eyes.

Morningmist - Light gray tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Chillwhisker - Light gray tabby tom with light blue eyes.

Hickoryroot - Brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Cedarnose - Dark brown tabby tom with a white splashed muzzle and paws, amber eyes.

Vanillafern - Creamy colored tabby she-cat with pale yellow eyes.

Apprentices

Batpaw - Smoky black tom with gray-brown muzzle and underbelly, amber eyes.

Darkpaw - Very dark brown tom with swirled black stripes, amber eyes.

Windclan

Leader: Gladestar - Light golden yellow tabby she-cat with pale greenish yellow eyes.

Deputy: Monarchwing - Orange she-cat with black spots and ear tips, golden yellow muzzle, chin, nose blaze, chest, and tail tip, darker orange paws, yellowish green eyes.

Medicine Cat: Silverberry - Silver she-cat with a darker front left paw, tail tip, and right ear, green eyes.
Apprentice, Starfaith

Warriors

Firetail - Orange tom with a darker reddish tail and ears, amber eyes.

Jaggedear - Brown tabby tom with a torn left ear, green eyes.
Apprentice, Tornadopaw

Driftrunner - Dark golden brown tom with very thick black classic tabby stripes, muzzle, chin, ears, paws, chest, and underbelly, amber eyes.

Willowtail- Light gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

Whitehare - White tom with light green eyes.

Apprentices

Tornadopaw - Dark gray tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Starfaith - Golden yellow she-cat with a yellow tail tip and star shape on chest, yellow eyes.

Queens

Clovernose - Brown and white she-cat with green eyes.

Riverclan

Leader: Frostedstar - White tom with pale blue eyes.

Deputy: Ravenfeather - Black tom with amber eyes.

Medicine Cat: Otterpelt - Red-brown she-cat with amber eyes.
Apprentice, Sagepaw

Warriors

Frozenripple - Long furred silver tom with swirled white stripes, pale blue eyes.

Lemonsplash - White tom with yellow patches, yellow eyes.

Pebblestep - Mottled gray tom with white paws, pale green eyes.

Petalfin - Silver, black, dark gray, and white splashed she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentices

Sagepaw - Silver and black tabby she-cat with pale blue-green eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Skyclan

Leader: Ravenstar - Long furred black tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Sandblaze - Light golden yellow tom with light brown-ginger paws, mark on chest, ears, chin, and yellowish blaze on

forehead and tail tip. Yellow eyes.

Medicine Cat: Ryeheart - Brown tabby tom with dark brown tabby legs, tail, ears, and nose blaze, creamy chin, muzzle, chest, and tail tip, amber eyes.

Warriors

Tigerleap - Dark golden brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Brackenleaf - Dark ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Chapter 7

[image]

Bloodpaw followed Brownstripe into the camp, his paws sore from walking around the territory. He supposed he'd get used to that soon. He was deep in thought, still startled by his mentor's behaviour. His words echoed in his mind. "*Remember. No matter who they are... or how young they are... warriors will tear apart any enemy. Do you understand?"*

Bloodpaw tried to convince himself that his mentor had simply been telling him about the loyalty and strength that a warrior needed to defend his clan. But the way Brownstripe had looked at him... He knew that wasn't true. The words had been aimed toward him as though *he* were the enemy. *I don't understand!* He thought miserably. *What is it about me? Why do so many cats see me as a threat?*

"Hey, Bloodpaw!" He looked up to see Swiftpaw racing over to him, and he forced a purr, pushing away his worrisome thoughts. "How was your first day out as an apprentice?" His friend prompted. "Did you see the territory?"

"Yeah!" He felt a bit better as he remembered the scents and wonder of the forest. "It's amazing!"

"I know!" Swiftpaw meowed, his tail waving. "Did you see the thunderpath?"

Bloodpaw shuddered. "Yes, and I never want to see it again," He purred. "What did you do today?"

"I-"

Revengepaw ran over, slamming his brother aside with one of his broad shoulders. "We did some awesome battle training!" He boasted while Swiftpaw regained balance. "Cougarfoot showed me this one move-" He broke off and crouched. "Watch!" He sprang at his brother, who let out a started grunt as he was pushed over onto his back. Revengepaw pinned him and began swiping sheathed hind paws at his soft white belly fur.

"Hey!" Swiftpaw complained, and his brother leaped off of him, looking proud of his demonstration.

"Now imagine if my claws were unsheathed and his blood and guts were flying all over the clearing!' Revengepaw purred.

Bloodpaw flattened his ears, disturbed. "I-I'd rather not..."

Revengepaw chuckled as Swiftpaw got to his paws and shook pine needles from his fur. "I'm going to be the fiercest warrior the forest has ever seen!" The white tom boasted, crouching and flexing his claws. "I can't wait to test my skills on the ThunderClan cat who killed Maplefur." He narrowed his amber eyes.

Swiftpaw sat down and looked away. "There's no proof a ThunderClan cat did it," He mumbled.

His brother glared at him. "He was found right across the border! What more proof do you need?"

"He has a point." Bloodpaw had to agree.

"But that doesn't mean he died there." The black and white apprentice shuffled his paws. "I-I mean.. What if-"

"Swiftpaw! Revengepaw!"

Bloodpaw turned to see Poisonedsap and Cougarfoot padding across the clearing to them. The two golden furred warriors stayed

shoulder to shoulder, pelts brushing. Bloodpaw was willing to bet every frog in the forest that they were mates now. He was still surprised at how quickly Poisonedsap had moved on. It seemed like the moment Maplefur's body was found, she fell for Cougarfoot. *I suppose they were never very close anyway.* He thought, remembering Maplefur and Poisonedsap arguing over Swiftpaw and Revengepaw. *I can't imagine what any warrior would see in her...*

The couple reached them, and Bloodpaw noticed Swiftpaw's fur flattening like he'd been startled by them. Did she scare him that much? Poisonedsap touched her nose to Revengepaw's, then rasped her tongue over his ear. "I'm so proud of you," She purred. She cast Cougarfoot a warm look. "You're lucky to have Cougarfoot as a mentor."

The golden tom dipped his head, looking embarrassed. "He's a great apprentice."

Poisonedsap rubbed her head against his, then gazed at her kits as she leaned against him. "Depthstar is allowing you to go to the gathering." She meowed, pausing before adding, "It should be an interesting one."

Swiftpaw nodded, and Revengepaw looked at his mother eagerly. "Is Depthstar going to confront ThunderClan about Maplefur?"

She nodded, her amber eyes gleaming. "There will finally be justice."

Bloodpaw felt awkward among the little family. Especially talking about Maplefur's death with such eagerness. But thinking about the gathering made his stomach churn with excitement. He'd never been to one, and he was eager to see fourtrees, the other leaders, talk to cats from other clans..! "Can I go to the gathering, too?" He blurted out hopefully.

Poisonedsap glared at him, looking ready to snap a response, but before she could, Cougarfoot spoke. "Why don't you ask Depthstar?" He suggested.

Bloodpaw nodded, grateful to Cougarfoot for not giving him a

negative response. He walked away from the group and looked around the camp. He couldn't see the clan leader anywhere. *He must be in his den.* He thought. *I don't want to bother him..!* He spotted Cobratail standing beside the meeting rock, speaking with Cliffshade and Foxshadow.

"You two are in charge of guarding the camp while we're gone," The red and black tom was saying. "Hawkfeather and Dewstorm won't be here, so if there's an emergency, come let us know."

"Alright," Cliffshade dipped his head, and the two warriors turned away to take their positions by the thorn tunnel.

Bloodpaw's stomach twisted nervously at speaking directly to such authority. He drew in a deep breath, and approached him. "E-excuse me, Cobratail?"

Cobratail rested his amber gaze on him. "Bloodpaw, yes?"

"Can I go to the gathering?" He asked hopefully. "I won't be any trouble-"

"Of course you won't." Cobratail twitched his tail. "You may come."

Bloodpaw's tail curled up as his heart raced. "Thank you!" He dipped his head respectfully as he backed away, then turned and ran back to Swiftpaw and Revengepaw. Cougarfoot and Poisonedsap had left.

Swiftpaw's ears perked forward. "Well?"

"I can go!" Bloodpaw exclaimed eagerly.

His friend let out a purr of anticipation. "Awesome! I'll show you around!"

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Bloodpaw looked around, amazed by the atmosphere of fourtrees. He felt overwhelmed by the massive number of cats around him. The full moon shone brightly among the warriors of silverpelt. The four ancient oaks stood circling the great rock, their dark leaves

bathed in moonlight.

"How long have the great oaks been there?" Bloodpaw breathed to Swiftpaw. He hadn't left his friend's side since they arrived. He'd started to feel scared among so many cats. Swiftpaw had promised to stay with him. "They're huge!"

"No cat knows," His friend responded, gazing up at the great rock. Depthstar sat there, his pelt looking even more blue in the moonlight. Three other cats sat with him. "Longer than the clans have existed, that's for sure. The founding leaders, Skystar, Shadowstar, Riverstar, Windstar, and Thunderstar once sat up there."

"Wow." Bloodpaw stared at the great rock. *How many generations of leaders have stood there?* He looked down from the rock and saw Cobratail sitting down with three other deputies, curling his tail over his paws as he looked across the clearing. A little ways away, Hawkfeather and Dewstorm sat together, speaking to some other medicine cats.

"See that white tom beside Depthstar?" Swiftpaw meowed, and Bloodpaw looked at the cat he was pointing out. "That's Frostedstar, the leader of RiverClan. The she-cat beside him is Gladestar of WindClan." The slender golden yellow tabby flicked her tail as she studied the cats below. "The black tom is Ravenstar of SkyClan."

Bloodpaw nodded thoughtfully. "Who are the deputies?" Cobratail was speaking with a pale ginger tom. A beautiful black spotted orange she-cat sat with her fluffy tail curled neatly over her paws. A little ways from them was a black tom, who was clearly keeping his distance from the other deputies.

"The cat Cobratail's talking to is Sandblaze," Swiftpaw said. "He's the SkyClan deputy. That pretty she-cat is Monarchwing of WindClan, and that black tom who looks as friendly as a thorn bush is Ravenfeather of RiverClan." He paused. "And I suppose you want to know the medicine cats, too," He purred. "That pretty yellow she-cat who Dewstorm is speaking with, that's Starpaw of WindClan."

Dewstorm looked content and happy as he spoke with her. She

certainly was pretty. Her yellow pelt shone under the moonlight, eyes to match. Hawkfeather was talking to a reddish brown she-cat. "She's Silverberry's apprentice," Swiftpaw pointed out the silver she-cat behind Starpaw. "And the cat Hawkfeather's with is Otterpelt of RiverClan. The SkyClan medicine cat is Ryeheart. He's sitting near Silverberry, there."

"Swiftpaw," Poisonedsap pushed through the crowd, Revengepaw and Mottledface following. "We're going to speak with some RiverClan cats. Join us." It sounded more like an order than an invitation.

Swiftpaw looked at her hesitantly. "I told Bloodpaw I'd stay with him."

Poisonedsap narrowed her eyes, her tail lashing. "Very well," She retorted and turned away.

"Why does he want to hang out with *him*?" Revengepaw grunted as he passed.

Bloodpaw noticed his friend looking upset for a moment. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, uh..." Swiftpaw blinked over his shoulder. "ThunderClan's here." Bloodpaw turned and watched as a group of cats arrived. He immediately recognized the scent Brownstripe had pointed out to him at the thunderpath. A broad shouldered white tom and a spotted ginger and cream she-cat led the group.

"Is that white cat the leader?" Bloodpaw whispered. He certainly looked like he held a position of power, the way he held his chin up high, muscles rippling under his pelt.

"No, that's the deputy, Snowfalcon," Swiftpaw responded. "I'd hate to get into a fight with him! The she-cat with him is Strawberrystar." He paused. "And her medicine cat is that small black and white tom, Spicewhisker."

"Strawberrystar," Ravenstar greeted from the great rock as the cream and ginger she-cat wove through the crowd toward the oaks.

"I trust the prey is running well in ThunderClan?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Strawberrystar snapped as she leaped onto the rock to join the other leaders.

Bloodpaw was startled by her attitude. "I thought she'd be a lot nicer with a name like *Strawberrystar*," He commented, and Swiftpaw let out an amused purr.

But Ravenstar didn't respond to Strawberrystar's retort. He only flicked a tufted ear as the slender she-cat settled beside Gladestar.

Depthstar dipped his head in greeting, but the ThunderClan leader only glanced at him.

"Wow," Bloodpaw murmured. "She's really rude."

Swiftpaw nodded. "And she's the cat Depthstar's going to accuse of murder." He whispered.

He sighed. "Great."

"Well?" The cream and ginger she-cat growled impatiently. "Let's get started before my paws freeze!"

"We wouldn't want that, now would we?" Frostedstar muttered under his breath.

"I'll begin," Ravenstar stepped forward. "Cats of all clans," He raised his voice, and the cats below quieted. "Welcome to the gathering. I will begin. The prey has been running well in SkyClan," He shot Strawberrystar a glance before continuing. "We have two new warriors, Goldenmoon and Brackenleaf!" The clans began to call out their names. Bloodpaw peered through the crowd and saw a young golden furred she-cat and a tabby tom, looking happy and proud.

"That's all I have to share." The black tom dipped his head. "Frostedstar?"

The Riverclan leader stepped forward. "RiverClan is well," He meowed. "Otterpelt expects that she will have an apprentice soon. One of our kits has taken an interest in the ways of a medicine cat."

"Is it Sagekit?" Hawkfeather asked the RiverClan medicine cat. "You spoke highly of her at the last moonstone meeting."

Otterpelt purred. "Yes. She won't stay away from my den, and I can't keep her away any longer!"

Gladestar spoke next. "WindClan has a new apprentice, Tornadopaw." Bloodpaw saw the dark tabby tom as the clans greeted him by his new name. "Prey is running well, and leaf-fall is being kind to us." The WindClan leader finished.

Strawberrystar stepped forward to speak next, as did Depthstar, and for a moment, the two cats glared at each other, as though silently debating on who would speak first. Then Strawberrystar growled and sat back, lashing her tail.

"ShadowClan is very well," Depthstar announced. "We have plenty of prey, and plenty of apprentices. Speaking of which, we've made a new apprentice this moon."

Bloodpaw froze. *He's going to say my name!* He quickly straightened, puffing out his chest proudly.

"Bloodpaw!"

He waited for the clans to begin chanting his name, as they had for Tornadopaw. But it never came. Every cat stared at him, murmuring to each other. On the great rock, the leaders exchanged startled looks.

"Bloodpaw?" Frostedstar exclaimed, blinking at Depthstar.

"Who named their kit *Bloodkit?"* Ravenstar asked, looking bewildered. "That's not a name for a kit."

Bloodpaw's heart sunk, his pelt burning under the eyes of the cats around him. It was enough to be stared at and discussed by his own clan. But now *all* the clans were! Swiftpaw licked his ear reassuringly.

"Bloodpaw?" Strawberrystar scowled, rising to her paws and glaring at the ShadowClan leader. "Really, Depthstar? You came here a few

moons ago with a *Revengepaw!* What kind of names are you giving your cats these days?" She sneered. "Has ShadowClan gone rogue?"

Depthstar's fur bristled momentarily before he forced it flat again, glaring at her steadily. "Don't question me and my clan, Strawberrystar," He growled. "Perhaps you should start questioning your own clan."

Strawberrystar bristled. "What's that supposed to mean?"

The ShadowClan leader turned his attention to the cats gathered below the great rock. "Cats of all clans," He meowed. "Several moons ago, one of our warriors, Maplefur, was found dead on ThunderClan's side of the border."

As cats began to murmur anxiously below, Depthstar continued. "I have considered alternatives, but there is no other explanation." He narrowed his blue eyes at the ThunderClan leader.

Strawberrystar's eyes lit with disbelief. "Are you accusing my warriors of murder?" She hissed.

"Yes."

Yowls of alarm and fury rose up from the clans. Bloodpaw couldn't help but feel relieved that the attention was no longer on him. But he still didn't like the tension.

"That's crazy!" A brown and cream tabby warrior snarled. "What reason would we have to kill one of your warriors?"

"That's what I'd like to know." Depthstar shot back to the ThunderClan warrior.

Strawberrystar looked furious, her tail fluffed up twice its size. "You must be out of your mind to accuse us like this!" She hissed in his face. "ThunderClan cats do not break the warrior code!"

Bloodpaw remembered how eager Poisonedsap and Revengepaw had been for this moment. He peered through the crowd curiously, and spotted them sitting close to the great rock with Mottledface. The three cats gazed up at the leaders, looking delighted at the

conflict. *Okay, I understand that Poisonedsap and Revengepaw want justice for Maplefur...* He thought. *But what does Mottledface have to gain?*

"One of your warriors must confess," Depthstar retorted his tail lashing. "You've always been too proud of your clan, but you must admit that not all of your warriors are-"

"Don't you dare call my warriors disloyal!" Strawberrystar unsheathed her claws.

The other leaders who had been watching this debate quietly seemed to realize that things were about to get nasty. "Enough," Frostedstar stepped between the two leaders. "This is a truce. There will be no violence. Every cat just tell the truth."

"The truth has been told!" Strawberrystar pushed past Frostedstar to face the ShadowClan leader. Her amber eyes blazed with fury, her tail lashing madly. "ThunderClan is *not* responsible for the death of your warrior!" She spat. "Understood?"

Depthstar hesitated, meeting her flaring gaze calmly. "Very well. Perhaps I was wrong."

"Yes, you're *very* wrong," Strawberrystar spun around. "The gathering is over! I have nothing to say."

Bloodpaw heard Swiftpaw sigh in relief beside him. He looked at Poisonedsap and Revengepaw curiously. Poisonedsap looked absolutely stunned, anger blazing in her eyes. Her son looked just as dumbfounded.

"Thank StarClan that wasn't worse," Swiftpaw muttered as the cats began to part. "Let's go."

Depthstar leaped down from the great rock, twitching his tail as Cobratail joined him. "ShadowClan," He called. "Let's go home."

As they began to leave fourtrees, Poisonedsap ran to Depthstar's side. "What was that?" She hissed. "Why did you back off?"

Depthstar glanced at her. "I know Strawberrystar," He meowed. "I

believe that her reaction shows that ThunderClan is innocent. A rogue must have killed Maplefur on ThunderClan territory."

"I don't believe that for a second!" She spat, her tail bristling. "Maplefur must be avenged. We must attack ThunderClan at once!"

"Poisonedsap," Depthstar let out a sharp warning growl. "*I'm* the clan leader, *not* you. You seem to forget that. We will *not* attack ThunderClan, is that clear?"

She looked very irritated. "So what are we going to do?" She snarled. "Sit back and wait for more cats to die at the paws of ThunderClan?"

"This conversation is over." Depthstar looked away and raced ahead to catch up to Cobratail. Somehow, Bloodpaw didn't think it was over at all. *Poisonedsap will not let this go...*

Chapter 8

[image]

"Fox-dung!" Bloodpaw hissed as the thrush flew into the air moments before he could grasp it. He stumbled clumsily as his paws hit the ground, looking up irritably as the bird flapped and disappeared into the trees.

It had been several days since the gathering. His apprenticeship was going well. He'd spent this time training with Brownstripe and collecting moss for the elders with Swiftpaw. He enjoyed having his own nest in the apprentices den and talking to Swiftpaw late at night without having the queens tell them to go to sleep. However, it wasn't fun sharing the den with Revengepaw. The massive tom consistently growled and twitched in his sleep, as though he dreamed of battle. It was unsettling to Bloodpaw. Swiftpaw never said much about it.

He heard Brownstripe approach and looked back, feeling disappointed in himself. *Great, what'll he think of me? This is the third time I've tried to catch a bird!* But his mentor didn't give much away. He looked at Bloodpaw calmly, his ear twitching. "Good try. Why don't you try for a mouse or a frog instead?" He suggested.

A mouse or a frog, he says! Bloodpaw thought crossly. He'd mastered mice and frogs. They were easy! It was birds that were more difficult. *It's harder to catch something when it can fly away from you!*

"Over there," Brownstripe pointed his muzzle toward a tree. "There's usually some among the roots."

"Why can't you just show me how to properly catch a thrush?" Bloodpaw asked.

The tabby didn't respond, looking distracted. "There's mice over there. Go on."

Bloodpaw sighed and headed toward the tree Brownstripe had

pointed out. He'd never actually given him advice when he missed a catch, or even point out what he was doing wrong. In addition to that, he seemed very distracted. Bloodpaw assumed that it was because his mate, Rosebreeze, had moved into the nursery yesterday. She wouldn't have her kits for a few moons, but Brownstripe still seemed to think about her and his future kits constantly. Bloodpaw couldn't blame him, but still felt that he deserved his mentor's attention. *he's supposed to be training me!*

I don't want to catch another stupid mouse! He paused beside the roots, glancing over his shoulder at Brownstripe. He was looking aside at some trees, lost in thought again. An idea popped into his head. *I* will *catch a thrush!* He decided determinedly. *Maybe that will impress you.* He raised his head and peered into the branches above. He spotted one perched on a branch, almost camouflaged against the tree. Bloodpaw narrowed his eyes. It was very high up. But it looked fat and easy to catch. *That one's mine!* He leaped at the base of the tree, grunting as he dug his claws into the bark.

Alright! He thought, pulling himself up onto a branch. *This isn't so bad...* He continued to climb up the tree, slowing his pace as he neared the thrush. *There!* As he settled the branch, he accidentally brushed against a branch of pine needles. Several jabbed into his side, and he shifted away. It hurt, but he held his tongue. *Ow!*

He looked down and tensed, immediately digging his claws into the branch. *Great StarClan, I'm high!* He began to feel dizzy and quickly turned his attention to the thrush several fox lengths ahead. It was cleaning itself, poking its beak under its wing. Bloodpaw swallowed. *Okay... I'll catch it, and then jump over to that tree beside it... I'll climb down there.* He began to carefully shift himself along the branch toward the bird. He lowered his body against the branch, fixing his yellow eyes on the speckled creature. *I've got you now!* He sprang at the thrush, claws outstretched, but the bird heard and immediately ascended from the branch.

"No!" Bloodpaw felt his paw brush feathers for a heartbeat as it flew away. He prepared to land, only to find open air under his paws. He'd missed the branch. His heart exploded with panic. *I'm going to die!* He let out a terrified yowl as he plummeted downward, facing a fury of pine branches. He thudded to the ground, letting out a small

cry. *I'm alive!*

He breathed hard, his heart racing from shock. He was sore everywhere. But it could have been a lot worse. *Thank StarClan the branches broke my fall!* A shadow cast over him, and he scented Brownstripe. He tensed, looking up at him. *Great! I failed to catch the thrush* and *disobeyed him. He's going to be mad at me.* But Brownstripe didn't look angry. Only startled. "Are you alright?"

He's not mad? Bloodpaw warily started to his paws, wincing in pain. His shoulder hurt from the impact. But it wasn't serious. He decided that the pain would go away quickly. "I'm fine." He shook pine needles from his fur.

Brownstripe raised his head to look up at the tree Bloodpaw had fallen from. "You climbed that?"

"Yes." Bloodpaw shifted his paws.

"Wow." He sounded impressed. "I've never seen an apprentice climb a tree that high, let alone fall from one without a broken leg."

"Really?" Bloodpaw's pelt burned with pride. *I've finally managed to impress him!* "I-I was trying to catch a thrush."

Brownstripe looked away from the tree to Bloodpaw. "And you missed it?"

"Yes." He admitted.

"Hmm." His mentor looked thoughtful. "Come on." He turned away, waving his tail in signal for him to follow. "I'll show you how it's done." Bloodpaw's ears perked eagerly, and he followed.

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The sun was setting by the time they returned to camp. Bloodpaw led the way, holding a thrush in his jaws. He felt very satisfied with himself. Brownstripe had shown him how to properly catch birds and hunt safely in trees. They'd practiced over and over until Bloodpaw had learned how to do it. He'd caught a huge one all by himself, and Brownstripe had caught three while demonstrating.

Bloodpaw proudly padded across the clearing and rested his thrush on the fresh kill pile.

"Bloodpaw!" Flameheart padded over to him, his green eyes lit with warmth. "Did you catch that by yourself?"

He nodded just as Swiftpaw and Revengepaw joined them. "Nice catch!" His friend meowed.

"I'm proud of you," Flameheart purred. Bloodpaw's heart swelled with pride.

Revengepaw glanced at the thrush, twitching his tail. "I could've done better," He grunted. Bloodpaw was too happy with himself to let the aggressive apprentice get to him.

"Bloodpaw! Bloodpaw!"

He looked toward the excited yowls and let out a purr. Mistykit and Coldkit raced toward him. Their mother, Diamondrain, watched from outside the nursery, her blue eyes warm.

The kits leaped at him, and he reared on his hind paws, allowing them to push him onto his back. He suddenly realized how big they were getting. The two kits were more than half his size.

"We miss you!" Mistykit exclaimed as she balanced on his stomach and chest. "There's no one else to play with!"

"Yeah!" Coldkit added, pawing at his head playfully. "Diamondrain and Rosebreeze are no fun!"

Bloodpaw purred. "I miss you, too!" He gently pushed Mistykit off of him and nosed Coldkit away as he got to his paws. "What have you been up to?"

"Nothing!" Coldkit sighed. "Boring stuff."

"But you've been doing lots of exciting stuff!" Mistykit exclaimed, her silvery tail waving eagerly as she stared at him. "Did you catch that bird? What's training like?"

Coldkit leaned toward Bloodpaw. "What's the territory like? Have you fought any nosey Thunderclan cats?"

"Show us a battle move!" Mistykit urged.

"Slow down!" Bloodpaw chuckled. "I haven't fought anyone, or learned any battle moves yet. But I know how to hunt."

Coldkit's eyes widened. "Show us!"

"Please!" Mistykit gasped.

"Okay, okay," Bloodpaw purred. "I'll show you the hunting crouch." He lowered himself to the ground. "Crouch as low to the ground as you can." The kits tried to copy him. "Mistykit, put your tail down!" Bloodpaw meowed, amused. "You're telling every creature in the forest where you are."

She immediately dropped it. "Sorry!"

"Okay, now move forward really slowly, and-"

"Depthstar! Depthstar!"

Bloodpaw looked up sharply as Poisonedsap's yowl sounded from the thorn tunnel. A moment later, she and Blackstorm burst into the camp, out of breath and alarmed. Cobratail, who had been laying near the meeting rock, sat up sharply. "What is it?" He hurried to meet the two warriors.

Blackstorm looked at him, his yellow eyes round with anxiety. "Fetch my father!" He urged. The deputy hesitated, then quickly turned and ran to Depthstar's den.

"What's going on?" Mistykit asked from behind Bloodpaw.

Something bad. Bloodpaw thought. His stomach churned with anxiety. *Something is wrong.* A moment later, Depthstar emerged from his den, following Cobratail to the two warriors. "What's wrong?"

"Depthstar, there's something you need to see." Poisonedsap

meowed anxiously. "Right now."

Unease flickered in the clan leader's eyes. "Alright. Cobratail, stay here." He looked around, spotting Bloodpaw. "Bloodpaw! Brownstripe! Come with us."

Bloodpaw jumped a little. *Me?*

Brownstripe brushed past Bloodpaw. "Come on!"

Mistykit and Coldkit stared up at him, disappointed. "But you were showing us-"

"I have to go!" Bloodpaw quickly raced after his mentor, and followed Blackstorm and Poisonedsap out of camp. He was nervous, causing the brisk air to feel even colder as they ran through the forest. *What's going on?* He wondered. He grew even more anxious when they neared the thunderpath. *What are we doing-* He broke off mid thought when he saw it.

"No..." Depthstar murmured as they reached him.

"Great StarClan," Brownstripe whispered. Bloodpaw's heart was caught in his throat. A white and cream tom lay near the thunderpath, his pale yellow eyes wide and lifeless. Blood stained the grass under him, no doubt originating from the ragged wound in his neck. Bloodpaw hadn't known this warrior very well.

"Milkblaze..." Depthstar closed his eyes for a moment, as though silently grieving. After a moment, he looked at Poisonedsap and Blackstorm. "Who did this?"

Blackstorm twitched his dark tail. "Smell him."

Bloodpaw sat down, watching as the dark blue-gray tom leaned over the dead warrior and sniffed him. His ears flattened. "ThunderClan..." He murmured.

"Yes." Poisonedsap growled. "*ThunderClan* has taken another one of our warriors!"

Brownstripe narrowed his eyes. "Milkblaze was Maplefur's brother."

He murmured. "Coincidence?"

Depthstar was silent, and Poisonedsap approached him, her ragged tail lashing. "Surely you believe it now?" She hissed. "Strawberrystar is a liar! Her warriors are murderers! We must attack at once!"

When Depthstar still didn't speak, Blackstorm did. "Depthstar, you can't deny this! How many more warriors are to die at the paws of ThunderClan fox-hearts?"

"Something has to be done," Brownstripe agreed.

"If you'd done something about this sooner, Milkblaze would still be alive," Poisonedsap added quietly. "Who's next?" She waved her tail to Blackstorm and Brownstripe. "One of your sons?"

Depthstar remained silent. Bloodpaw stared at him, wondering what he would say. *There's no doubt it was ThunderClan now!* The dark tom sat up and raised his head toward the setting sun, his pelt tinted with orange. "I've been a fool." He meowed quietly. "I can't disregard this any longer. ThunderClan has taken the lives of two of our warriors, and they must pay. We shall attack ThunderClan in three sunrises."

Chapter 9

[image]

"Good, now come at me," Brownstripe instructed.

Bloodpaw leaped at his mentor, aiming for his shoulder to off-balance him, but the tabby leaped aside. He hit the earth with a thud, quickly scrambling to his paws.

"You've got to be faster." The brown tabby meowed, flicking his tail. "Like this." He lunged at Bloodpaw, who let out a startled grunt as Brownstripe pinned him onto his back. Bloodpaw gritted his teeth and kicked up with his hind legs, throwing the warrior off of him.

Brownstripe rolled to the ground before rising to his paws quickly. "Good job." He nodded as Bloodpaw got to his paws and puffed out his chest proudly. "Let's practice the front paw blow again."

"Alright!" Bloodpaw meowed, glancing to the other side of the clearing, where Revengepaw and Swiftpaw were training with their mentors. Cougarfoot and Revengepaw tussled around the clearing like a whirlwind, swinging hard blows and snapping their jaws at each other. Swiftpaw and Timberstorm weren't engaged so roughly, but still trained more fiercely than Bloodpaw ever had with Brownstripe.

"Bloodpaw!"

He snapped out of his thoughts as a paw batted his ear, and a moment later, he was on the ground again under Brownstripe, who looked irritated. "Never let yourself be distracted in battle." He meowed. "If this had been a real fight, I would have ripped you to shreds." He let him up. "Come on, swing at me."

Bloodpaw lashed a paw out at his mentor, striking him square in the head. Brownstripe reared, and Bloodpaw pushed him onto his back, rather proud of himself when the warrior went limp, admitting defeat. "Well done." Bloodpaw got off of him, purring

proudly. *I'm really good at this!*

"Brownstripe."

Bloodpaw turned to see Cougarfoot and Timberstorm approaching with their apprentices. Swiftpaw looked exhausted, while Revengepaw was energized and ready for another fight.

"How about the apprentices practice together?" Cougarfoot suggested. "We can see them demonstrate their skills without our help."

Brownstripe nodded. "Good idea."

"I'm too tired for another fight," Swiftpaw sighed, slumping to the ground on his stomach. "Can I take a break?"

Timberstorm flicked his ear. "There are no breaks in battle."

"Let him." Cougarfoot meowed. "Revengepaw and Bloodpaw can go first."

"Awesome!" Revengepaw's eyes gleamed as he flexed his muscles.

Bloodpaw looked at the larger apprentice uncertainly. *Can I fight him? Sure, I can... I learned a lot today! Just remember your training!* "Okay!" Swiftpaw and their mentors moved to the side of the clearing to watch while Revengepaw and Bloodpaw began circling each other. He couldn't help but feel intimidated by the black-legged tom. His amber eyes were fixed on him like he was a piece of prey. *Do I look that fierce?*

"Begin," Cougarfoot meowed.

Revengepaw lunged, and Bloodpaw let out a startled gasp as the weight of the tom slammed against his chest, sending him rolling across the clearing. He started to his paws, but Revengepaw ran alongside him, swiping a hefty paw at his leg and knocking him off of his paws.

Bloodpaw hit the ground with a thud, and as the white tom circled to pin him, he thought quickly, swinging a forepaw at his head.

Revengepaw only laughed. "That's all you've got?" Bloodpaw growled angrily and rolled over before lunging at him, but Revengepaw ducked, and Bloodpaw gasped as he flew past him and rolled into the bushes. Revengepaw sneered and headed for him. Bloodpaw raised his head and stared at the older apprentice anxiously. His shoulder and chest ached.

"Stop!" Cougarfoot yowled suddenly. The apprentice reluctantly paused, twitching his tail and glancing at his mentor disgruntledly.

Bloodpaw looked at the golden tom in relief. *I don't know how much more I could've taken!* His body ached from Revengepaw's quick attacks. He stood up, wincing at the pain in his shoulder. When he saw the look on Cougarfoot's face, his relief faded to alarm. The warrior looked bewildered. "Bloodpaw, what has Brownstripe taught you?" He asked.

"Uh, how to successfully leap at an opponent, kicking, and the front paw blow," Bloodpaw responded nervously. *Did I do something wrong?* Cougarfoot and Timberstorm exchanged a surprised glance. Brownstripe didn't look at them.

"Brownstripe," Cougarfoot meowed, and the younger warrior glanced at him. "A word?" The tabby nodded, and Bloodpaw watched the two cats leave the clearing. *They're going to talk about how terrible I was. I thought I'd learned a lot though! Wasn't I doing it right?*

Timberstorm hesitated. "Swiftpaw, Revengepaw, let's go back to our training. I think Bloodpaw could use a rest."

Swiftpaw was staring at Bloodpaw. "Are you alright?"

"Fine." Bloodpaw muttered and looked away.

The black and white apprentice hesitated before turning to follow his mentor to the other side of the clearing. *I wonder what Brownstripe and Cougarfoot are saying about me.* Bloodpaw thought miserably. He looked toward the bushes at the side of the clearing. Behind them, he could hear the warriors talking, but he couldn't make out their words. *I don't want to, but... I need to know what*

they're saying! He padded over to the bushes and crouched, listening closely.

"Don't give me that excuse," Cougarfoot was meowing. "Why aren't you training him properly? You're treating him like a kit!"

"I don't think it's a good idea to show battle moves to a cat who may use them against us one day," Brownstripe growled. "You remember what Hawkfeather said."

Bloodpaw's heart sunk. *Hawkfeather thinks I'll use battle moves on my clanmates? Why would he think that?*

Cougarfoot let out an irritated snort. "Bloodpaw will be slaughtered in the battle if you don't start training him properly!"

It was quiet for a moment before Brownstripe spoke. "Maybe that wouldn't be a bad thing."

Bloodpaw's breath caught in his throat. *What?* His heart pounded rapidly. *I've always questioned if Brownstripe didn't like me, but... He wants me dead..?*

Cougarfoot let out a hiss. "Don't say that!" When there was no response, he growled. "Start training him properly."

"Fine." Brownstripe muttered.

Bloodpaw at down and curled his tail around him, feeling even more upset with himself. *I'm never going to escape this discrimination...* He thought. *Am I?*

***

Bloodpaw and Brownstripe began training at dawn the next day. He felt a bit uncomfortable about his mentor after overhearing his comment yesterday. "*Bloodpaw will be slaughtered in the battle if you don't start training him properly!" "Maybe that wouldn't be a bad thing."* He wished he could forget how carelessly his mentor had spoken of him potentially dying. But he know those words would stick with him forever.

On the bright side, Brownstripe had definitely been training him better. They'd been practicing all day, and Bloodpaw even learned some of the moves Revengepaw had used on him yesterday. He felt completely prepared for the battle tomorrow. And even more prepared to face Revengepaw.

The two apprentices faced each other now, ready to practice again. Their mentors sat at the side of the clearing, watching. "Are you gonna fight like a kit again, Bloodpaw?" Revengepaw teased.

Bloodpaw narrowed his eyes. "No!" He crouched, his tail lashing as he fixed his eyes on his opponent. *I'll win this..!*

"Begin!" Cougarfoot meowed.

The apprentices leaped at each other, and Bloodpaw gasped out as he was thrown to the ground onto his back. Not this time! Bloodpaw lashed out his hind paws at Revengepaw's stomach, and his opponent snarled as he lost his grip on him. Bloodpaw swung a paw at his face and slid out from under the tom, leaping onto his shoulders, as Brownstripe had advised to do when facing a larger opponent. That, and knock him off his paws.

Revengepaw snarled. "Get off!" He rolled onto his back, and Bloodpaw gasped out as he was crushed under him, smothered by white fur. He expected Revengepaw to get off as he began struggling for air, but he didn't. *I can't breath!*

"Revengepaw!" Cougarfoot sounded alarmed. "Get-"

Bloodpaw twisted his head aside and bit into Revengepaw's shoulder, and the black and white tom hissed, jerking away. Bloodpaw quickly leaped to his paws and hissed at his opponent.

"Well done." He heard Cougarfoot comment, but he kept his focus on Revengepaw. His heart raced from the exhilaration of battle.

"So you've learned a few things!" Revengepaw sneered. "You'll never be a good fighter like me, *Bloodpaw!"* The way Revengepaw had said his name made him angry. With a yowl he lunged at the apprentice, grunting as he pushed the heavy tom to the ground.

"The clan doesn't like you, *Bloodpaw!"* Revengepaw sneered scornfully, pushing him off. "And neither do I!" He swung a paw at him.

Bloodpaw jerked back in shock as claws sliced his muzzle. "Hey!" He gasped. "You can't-"

"Are you scared, *Bloodpaw?"* Revengepaw slammed into him and pinned him onto his back, digging his claws into his shoulders. "Are you going to fight me like a warrior, or a declawed kittypet?" He hissed. "Little Blood*kit?"*

Fury burned inside him, and with a yowl he kicked the tom off of him. Revengepaw fell onto his side, and Bloodpaw rolled over as he got up, turning and swiping his claws at his opponent's ear. Revengepaw snarled and slammed into Bloodpaw, slashing at his flank, and he yowled before sinking his teeth into the white tom's shoulder, tasting blood. Revengepaw pulled free and swiped his claws at Bloodpaw's face.

"Hey!" Cougarfoot realized that their claws were unsheathed. "Stop!"

Blinded by anger, Bloodpaw ignored the warrior and lunged at Revengepaw, throwing him onto his back.

"Bloodpaw!" Brownstripe raced over and shouldered his apprentice away from Revengepaw. "What do you think you're doing?"

Bloodpaw glared at his mentor, staggering backwards. "He-!"

"Clan cats train with their claws sheathed!" Cougarfoot snarled. "What are you two thinking?"

Revengepaw got up, glaring at his opponent. Blood trickled from a cut in his ear, and a bite wound in his shoulder. Bloodpaw suddenly became aware of his muzzle and flank stinging from Revengepaw's attack. His wounds felt wet, and he realized he was bleeding. The taste of blood filled his mouth.

"Go to the medicine den, both of you," Cougarfoot ordered. "Now."

***

Bloodpaw returned to camp, feeling angry and frustrated. *It's not my fault Revengepaw unsheathed his claws! He was taunting me! What was I supposed to do, let him tease me and slice me to shreds?*

"Bloodpaw?" He heard Bloomfire gasp, and he sighed. *Oh, no...* His mother raced over to him, her eyes wide with alarm. "What happened?" She gasped, sniffing his pelt. "You're bleeding! Are you hurt? Let me fetch Hawkfeather."

"No, that's-" Bloodpaw began.

"Hawkfeather!" Bloomfire yowled, and Bloodpaw flinched as every cat in the clearing looked at him. *Great, thanks Bloomfire!*

"Bloodpaw's covered in blood." He heard Cliffshade comment. "Hmm."

"Wait until Hawkfeather sees." Greenpine, responded quietly.

Stop talking about me!

"What's going on?"

Bloodpaw's heart sunk as Hawkfeather padded out of his den. *Isn't Dewstorm around?* He wondered desperately. *I don't want to see Hawkfeather!*

"Bloodpaw is hurt!" Bloomfire meowed anxiously, nudging him forward. "I think he was attacked!"

"We were just training!" Bloodpaw mumbled.

Hawkfeather nodded, turning away. "Come on."

Bloodpaw drew in a deep breath, then a hard sigh before following the medicine cat into his den. He didn't like being alone with Hawkfeather. There was clear tension between them. He sat down quietly, and Hawkfeather began pressing cobwebs to his wounds.

It was quiet for a moment before the spotted tabby spoke. "Why would you start a fight, Bloodpaw?" He growled. "You're supposed to train with your claws sheathed. Why would you want to hurt

your clanmates?"

Bloodpaw's eyes widened, frustration burning through him. *He thinks* I *started the fight??* He opened his jaws to speak, but Hawkfeather went on. 'Tomorrow is the battle against ThunderClan. My herbs can't afford to be wasted on reckless apprentices."

"I didn't start it!" Bloodpaw blurted out, unable to contain the anger boiling inside of him. "Why would I want to harm any cat? I never would have done it if Revengepaw hadn't unsheathed his claws first!" He dug his claws into the ground, and Hawkfeather glanced down at them. "Why do you all think I'm such a bad cat?" He hissed. "Revengepaw's the one you should be worried about!"

Hawkfeather twitched his tail. "You've been healed. Get out of my den."

"Will you listen to me for-"

"I said, get out of my den!" The medicine cat snarled. Bloodpaw stepped back, stunned. After a moment, he spun around and raced out. He went straight to his den and lay in his nest, feeling miserable. *How dare he??*

"Bloodpaw?" He heard Swiftpaw speak from the mouth of the den. "Are you okay?"

"Leave me alone!" Bloodpaw snapped, shutting his eyes. After a moment, he felt guilty. "I want to be alone. Sorry."

Swiftpaw hesitated. "Okay." He meowed quietly. "I'll be here if you need me." He paused. "I know you didn't start the fight. I won't let any cat believe you did." He turned away. Swiftpaw's support made him feel a little better. But he knew no matter what his friend said, the rest of the clan would always think differently. *I'll never be accepted...*

Chapter 10

[image]

The light of dawn peered over the horizon, its orange glow melting into the dark indigo sky. The ShadowClan cats raced through the awakening forest. Bloodpaw raced alongside Swiftpaw and Revengepaw, yesterday's dispute forgotten. There were bigger things for him to worry about. They were on their way to launch a surprise attack on ThunderClan.

Am I ready for this battle? Bloodpaw wondered nervously as he ran with his clanmates, the cold morning air rushing through his fur. *Did Brownstripe train me well enough?*

"I can't wait!" Revengepaw certainly seemed confident in himself. The hefty apprentice had been muttering to himself all morning. "I'll avenge Maplefur... Rip those ThunderClan cats to shreds!"

"Be quiet!" Cougarfoot hissed at him. The golden warrior ran close to his apprentice. "We're about to cross into Thunderclan territory."

Revengepaw cast his mentor a glare. "I'm just excited, that's all."

How can he be excited? Bloodpaw wondered, disturbed by the apprentice's eagerness. *We're about to go into battle! Cats are going to be hurt!* He looked beside him and saw a wary look on Swiftpaw's face. Bloodpaw guessed that he held the same concerns.

Unease ran through him as his clanmates began to cross the thunderpath. Bloodpaw hesitated before it, glancing into the distance, half expecting a monster to come roaring by to crush them. Revengepaw shouldered past him, along with several other warriors. Bloodpaw's stomach churned. *I don't want to cross it!*

Swiftpaw bumped his shoulder to his. "Don't worry, it's safe," He meowed. "Even the monsters aren't awake this early." Deciding that

Swiftpaw was right, he hurried across the thunderpath with him, startled at how hard the stone was beneath his paws. *How do monsters walk on this all day? My pads would fall off!*

Bloodpaw grew very uncomfortable as he followed his clanmates into unfamiliar territory, ThunderClan scent wafting around him. He was surprised at the large number of bushes and trees that he had to dodge. ShadowClan territory was a bit more open. Suddenly, Depthstar waved his tail in signal. Every cat quickly stopped.

He drew in a deep breath. *We must be close to the camp!* The ShadowClan leader murmured something to Cobratail, then looked over his shoulder at his clan as though making sure that they were ready. Revengepaw flexed his muscles, a purr rumbling in his throat. It unsettled Bloodpaw. After a moment, Depthstar waved his tail more urgently in signal. *They were ready.*

"ShadowClan, attack!" Depthstar's yowl broke the silence dawn had held.

The ShadowClan cats immediately bolted forward after their leader, and Bloodpaw shot after them. Revengepaw let out a yowl and ran ahead of the other apprentices. As they hurried through the trees, Bloodpaw spotted the thorn tunnel leading into the hollow. *The camp!*

Two warriors who had been guarding the entrance let out startled screeches, rising to meet the ShadowClan attackers, but they were no match for the flood of cats. Timberstorm and Ashcloud each attacked a guard while the clan filed into the camp.

Bloodpaw raced down the rocks into the hollow, Swiftpaw behind him. Warriors streamed out of their dens, stunned as they blinked away sleep and launched themselves into battle.

"ShadowClan! We're under attack!" A brown and cream tabby yowled before leaping at Greenpine. In a heartbeat, the hollow went from silence to a bowl of screeching, battling cats.

He found himself face to face with a young tabby tom who immediately lunged for him. Bloodpaw immediately ducked, feeling

a wave of satisfaction as the warrior soared over him, remembering when Revengepaw had used this move on him. Bloodpaw spun and attacked the tabby, sinking his teeth into his shoulder and bowling him over, letting memories of his training guide his actions.

The tabby screeched and bit Bloodpaw's forepaw, causing him to cry out and let go. The warrior took advantage of the moment and slashed at Bloodpaw's flank. A flash of black and white slammed into the tabby, knocking him off his paws, and Bloodpaw blinked.

"I'll help you with this one if you get the one on my tail!" Swiftpaw meowed as he swung a forepaw at the tabby.

Bloodpaw turned and saw a silver tom racing toward Swiftpaw. "Got it!" He hissed and launched himself at the tom, pinning him onto his back.

The silver cat snarled. "Get out of our camp, frog-breath!" He kicked Bloodpaw in the stomach, and he gasped out as the air was knocked out of him. His opponent swiped his claws at Bloodpaw's face and he fell off of him, catching his breath. "Nice try, apprentice!" The silver tom sneered and bolted away.

Bloodpaw staggered to his paws, his gaze darting around the camp. He recognized Snowfalcon immediately. The massive tom was swinging hard blows at Cobratail. Both deputies looked furious and deeply engaged in battle. Foxshadow rolled by with a ginger she-cat who clawed madly at his shoulders. He spotted Bloomfire's orange pelt across the clearing, and his father by her side, facing two ThunderClan warriors.

"Take that, ThunderClan flea-pelt!" Revengepaw screeched as he slashed his claws across the face of a dark furred warrior.

"Ha! Are you too scared to fight?"

Bloodpaw heard Mottledface and turned. To his surprise, he was crouched near an extremely young apprentice. She looked fresh out of the nursery, likely only apprenticed a few days ago, or possibly as recently as yesterday. Her fur was fluffed up in terror, eyes wide. "I-I don't know how to fight yet!" She whimpered.

"That's too bad for you," Mottledface commented and lashed out, catching the tiny apprentice's ear. She let out a squeak as blood trickled from the cut, and with a small growl, she leaped at the warrior, grabbing onto his shoulders. Mottledface easily shook the tiny cat off, and she went rolling into the bushes, staring at the ShadowClan warrior anxiously as he stalked toward her, a growl rumbling in his throat.

Bloodpaw immediately raced at the scene, slamming into Mottledface and knocking him away from the tiny apprentice. "What are you doing?" He gasped in horror.

Mottledface nearly fell over, clearly startled by Bloodpaw's attack. He spun to face him, amber eyes lit with anger. "What's wrong with you?" He spat. "She's an enemy!" He crouched to attack, but Bloodpaw stepped in front of the terrified apprentice.

"She's a fresh apprentice without any battle training!" Bloodpaw hissed defiantly. "Have you no honor? Go pick on someone your own size!"

A growl rumbled in Mottledface's throat, and for a moment, Bloodpaw wondered if his clanmate was going to attack him. But instead, he spun and ran off. He relaxed, relieved.

The tiny she-cat nervously slunk out from behind Bloodpaw. "T-thanks!" She stared at him uncertainly, as though wondering if he would attack.

"Go somewhere safe," Bloodpaw meowed. "You're not ready for this battle." With that, he ran back into the fray. He was about to take on another warrior when a furious screech rang out from within the hollow.

"Depthstar!"

Most of the cats paused to see what was happening, and Bloodpaw turned to see Depthstar and Strawberrystar facing each other on the highrock. He thought he'd seen the ThunderClan leader angry at the gathering. But today, she looked absolutely enraged. Her spotted fur fluffed up, causing her to look twice her size, her amber eyes lit

with fury.

"What in StarClan's name do you think you're *doing?"* Strawberrystar screeched out each word, bristling with fury.

Depthstar's tail lashed as he glared at the she-cat. "Two of my warriors have been killed by ThunderClan cats!" He hissed. "And we will not stand for it any longer!"

Strawberrystar's eyes flared with anger as she pushed her face close to Depthstar's. "We never touched your warriors!" She snarled furiously. "You stupid, mange-pelted excuse for a leader!" With a screech she lunged at him, grasping his neck with her claws and rolling him off of the highrock. Depthstar slashed at her shoulder, and as the two leaders fought, the hollow erupted into battle once more.

Bloodpaw jerked at a loud yowl close to him, abruptly cut off. He spun around and let out a horrified gasp.

Revengepaw had a brown tabby warrior pinned onto his back, teeth fastened deep into his throat. Blood ran onto the sandy ground. Bloodpaw silently screeched at the warrior to fight back, but it was clear that he was already dead. The tabby's amber eyes were frozen, and as the apprentice released him, he fell limp to the ground. Revengepaw raised his head triumphantly, eyes gleaming down at the dead warrior.

"Revengepaw!" Bloodpaw choked out, numb with shock. "What have you done?"

The white tom turned to look at him, and a chill bolted through Bloodpaw when he saw the cold stare Revengepaw gave him, his muzzle splotched with blood. The crimson liquid soaked his chin, spiking the fur beneath.

"He could have been the warrior who killed Maplefur," Revengepaw growled and licked blood from his muzzle.

Bloodpaw stared at the dead tabby, frozen with shock. "Warriors don't need to kill to win battles." He rasped.

Revengepaw narrowed his eyes, glancing down at the dead warrior. He gave the body a kick, then turned and ran off. Bloodpaw felt that he should drag the dead ThunderClan cat somewhere out of the way where he wouldn't be trampled. But instead, he backed away. *Knowing my clanmates, they'll just accuse me of killing him!*

Dark fur streaked in front of Bloodpaw and swiped a forepaw at him. He staggered back, snarling as he found himself face to face with a dark apprentice. "You're *Bloodpaw!"* The tom sneered, lashing a black paw at him.

Bloodpaw ducked, glaring at him. "Do I know you?"

"No," The dark tom responded, his skinny tail lashing. "But I know you! Depthstar announced your name at the last gathering. My name's Batpaw." He swiped at him, but Bloodpaw dodged. "And your name's *Bloodpaw!* What a weird name to give a kit!"

Bloodpaw let out an angry snarl and leaped at Batpaw, rolling him to the ground. "I bet you think you're so dangerous with a name like that!" The tom sneered. "But I know you're not!" He kicked Bloodpaw off of him, scrambling to his paws.

"I'm dangerous when I have to be!" Bloodpaw hissed, and the apprentice prepared to attack.

"Hickoryroot!" A cat suddenly wailed. "He's dead!"

Batpaw and Bloodpaw turned to see a creamy she-cat crouched over the tabby Revengepaw had killed, looking horrified. "He's dead!" She yowled again.

Many cats broke apart, battle forgotten as they stared at the dead warrior in alarm. Several ThunderClan cats raced to the dead tabby's side, letting out cries of grief. On the highrock, Strawberrystar was staring at Hickoryroot's body, clearly stunned. After a moment, she swung her head to Depthstar, anger lighting her eyes. "How could you allow your warriors to do such a thing?" She spat. "Murderer!"

"I could ask you the same thing!" Depthstar snarled.

Strawberrystar's eyes blazed with fury. "Get out of my camp!" She screeched. *"Now!"*

The ShadowClan leader held her furious gaze. "The battle has been won!" He yowled to his clan. Strawberrystar hissed at him as he leaped down from the highrock and headed for the thorn tunnel, waving his tail for his clan to follow. The ShadowClan cats yowled triumphantly.

Bloodpaw watched Revengepaw strut after his clan leader, his white tail high in the air. "We showed those ThunderClan fleabags!" He purred, clearly pleased with himself.

Poisonedsap padded to her son's side and rasped her tongue over his ear. "You fought brilliantly," She purred. "Maplefur would be so proud of you."

Would he? Bloodpaw stared at the massive apprentice, remembering the coldness in his eyes after he had killed Hickoryroot, muzzle spiked with blood. *Would he be proud of his son for murdering another cat?*

He suddenly wondered where Swiftpaw was. He hadn't seen him since the start of the battle. He turned his head and spotted the apprentice standing near Hickoryroot's body, staring at him. "You didn't have to die..." His friend whispered.

Bloodpaw looked back to Revengepaw who stood close to his mother, muscles rippling beneath his white pelt. *He killed that ThunderClan cat without hesitation... He longs for battle... What kind of apprentice is so willing to kill?*

Chapter 11

[image]

Bloodpaw found himself in the starlit forest he'd dreamed of all those moons ago. The red tabby she-cat stood before him again, glowing blue eyes fixed on him. He opened his jaws to speak, but she spoke first. "A darkness is growing. A poison that will spread and destroy your clan from within. Only the spilling of blood will save Shadowclan. Revenge will guide you."

The prophecy! His fur prickled. "Tell me what it means!" He begged. "Does it have something to do with Revengepaw? Did you see him in the battle last moon? He-" Bloodpaw gasped as the forest and she-cat vanished around him. He looked down at his paws, terrified that he would fade away too. But his dark red-brown paws still stood firmly on the ground. However, instead of star speckled grass, he saw solid stone beneath his paws. He looked up again and gasped.

He was at fourtrees, standing on the great rock. He looked around and saw the clearing filled with cats from all five clans. They stared up at him, eyes wide with horror. Bloodpaw felt his stomach churn with anxiety. *Are they afraid of me? What have I done?* He looked alongside him, expecting to see the clan leaders with him, but the space around him was empty. *Where-*

Suddenly, he spotted thin dark liquid running between the blades of grass below. At first, he thought it was mud. But as the liquid lapped heavier over the grass, he saw the crimson coloration more clearly. *It's blood!* As his heart raced with alarm, the blood began to spread across the clearing, rising upward. The cats below didn't seem to notice, eyes fixed on him as blood soaked their paws.

"Hey!" Bloodpaw shot to the edge of the great rock, staring down in horror. "Move! Hurry!" But the cats didn't seem to hear him. Blood splashed against the great rock and the four oaks as it rose higher until the cats were up to their chests in blood. He saw Flameheart

and Bloomfire among the cats being consumed in blood. "Flameheart! Bloomfire!" He wailed. "Why won't you move?"

The sea of blood rose higher, and Bloodpaw let out a wail as the cats below vanished under the surface. The blood rose over the great rock soaking his paws. "Help!"

His fur stood on end as the she-cat's voice breathed in his ear. "Only the spilling of blood will save ShadowClan."

Bloodpaw whipped his head aside, expecting to see the red tabby beside him, but there was no one there. The tide of blood rose higher, and he let out a terrified shriek as it swept him off his paws and he splashed madly at the thick liquid, struggling to keep his head above the surface. He let out a gasp as blood splashed against him, sending him under. His heart jolted as the crimson liquid filled his throat, and he choked desperately for air. *I'm going to drown!*

He awoke with a start, his heart racing as he gasped in air. He breathed heavily, trembling as he raised his head and looked around, blinking away sleep. His back was damp. For a heartbeat, he thought it was blood and his dream had become reality. He looked over his shoulder nervously, then relaxed. It looked like rain or something. But so late this season? Why-

Something wet fell on his nose, and he jumped, looking up. Little white flurries drifted between the branches in the roof of the den onto his pelt. He stood up quickly, tilting his head curiously. *What is that?* After a moment of confusion, he realized that the strange white pellets must be snow. He looked to the den entrance and froze, leaping to his paws and heading out of the den. His eyes widened.

Snow blanketed the clearing, whiter and purer than anything Bloodpaw had ever seen before. Some cats sat around talking quietly, while others were cleaning snow off of the dens, and creating paths in the snow.

Revengepaw and Swiftpaw sat to the side of the clearing. Revengepaw looked uninterested, while his brother stared up at the sky, eyes wide. "Wow!"

"It's just snow, mouse-brain," Revengepaw scoffed, twitching a black tipped ear.

Swiftpaw cast his brother a glance, scooping up a pawful of snow and tossing it at his face. The white tom bristled in shock, shaking his head to remove the flurries. "Hey!"

As Swiftpaw chuckled, a yowl of joy sounded from across the clearing. Bloodpaw turned and saw Mistykit and Coldkit pouncing about in the snow, eyes lit with delight.

Diamondrain sat by the nursery, watching them. "Be careful, kits!" She meowed. "Don't stay out for too long, or you'll catch a cold."

But the kits didn't seem to hear her, too distracted by the snow. "It's amazing!" Coldkit squeaked. "It's like the clouds fell from the sky!"

Mistykit pawed at the snow, her silver tail waving excitedly. She looked up, spotting Bloodpaw, and her eyes lit up. "Bloodpaw! Come play with us!"

He let out a purr and started toward the kits.

"Bloodpaw!"

He stopped as Brownstripe called out his name, trudging through the snow toward him. "We need to collect moss and extra branches for the dens," He meowed. He paused, narrowing his eyes. "You're an apprentice now. You can't waste time with kits."

Bloodpaw glanced down, twitching his tabby tail. *I wonder how Rosebreeze would feel if she heard you say that.*

"Come on." Brownstripe turned away, waving his tail, and Bloodpaw followed.

"Hey!" The kits realized he was leaving, and Mistykit let out a wail. "Play with us!"

"Yeah, where are you going?" Coldkit asked.

It broke his heart, but he ignored them and followed his mentor out

of the camp.

***

Bloodpaw returned to camp, holding a wad of moss. Beside him, Brownstripe carried three sticks in his jaws. They headed further into the clearing before his mentor set down the sticks, looking at Bloodpaw. "Why don't you bring that moss to the elders?" He suggested. "The cold is harsher for them."

Bloodpaw nodded and headed for the elders den while Brownstripe carried his sticks to the warriors den. The roof needed mending. He dipped his head as he padded into the den. The four elders lay in their nests. Foxshine was asleep, her white tail tip curled over her nose. But the others were awake.

"Bloodpaw!" Bluerain purred, blinking warmly at him. "Is that moss for us?"

"It'd better be!" Buzzardglare grumbled in his nest, his amber eyes narrow. "I'm freezing!"

Bloodpaw rested the moss on the ground. "Yes," He replied, beginning to stuff it into Bluerain's nest. "I can bring more if this isn't enough."

"That's fine, Bloodpaw." Carrottail reassured him, a purr rumbling in his throat. "Thank you."

"You're a fine apprentice, Bloodpaw," Bluerain rumbled. "And you're going to make an even finer warrior."

Buzzardglare rested his chin on his moss. One blind eye drifted aside, while the other was fixed firmly on Bloodpaw, who looked away nervously, focusing on Bluerain again. "Is that better?"

"Yes," The blue speckled she-cat gazed at him. "Did you know that we're kin?"

Bloodpaw looked up at her, curiosity prickling his pelt. "Really?"

Bluerain nodded, her blue eyes shining with warmth. "I was your

father's mother."

He blinked. "Do you mean my mother?" He asked, confused. "Flameheart told me his mother's name was Mossbranch."

"Oh!" He thought he saw alarm light the she-cat's eyes for a second. "Y-yes, your mother," She corrected, letting out a purr. "Silly me. Old age must be making me forgetful."

Bloodpaw dipped his head in understanding. "Oh." He turned and began pushing fresh moss into Carrottail's nest. When he was finished, he went to Buzzardglare and reached out to give him moss. The ragged tabby bristled and bared his teeth. "Stay away, blood kitten!" He spat.

Bloodpaw jerked back in shock. Bluerain glared at the tom. "Be quiet, Buzzardglare!" She hissed. "He's being kind."

The tabby snorted. "Enjoy it while it lasts."

Bloodpaw backed away, his tail drooping. "I'd better go."

Carrottail blinked at him apologetically. "Nevermind Buzzardglare," He murmured. "He's always a pain in the tail."

He left the den, looking downward. He should have been upset about Buzzardglare's harsh words. But strangely enough, he felt nothing. *I guess I've gotten used to being treated this way...* He began to think about Bluerain's words. "*I was your father's mother." How can she mistake her daughter for a tom? That's strange, even for an old cat...*

He spotted Flameheart and Bloomfire near the apprentices den, pawing snow aside to remove it from the clearing. He suddenly thought of an explanation for Bluerain's mistake and raced over to them. "Bloomfire!"

His parents turned to him, purring. "Bloodpaw," Bloomfire nuzzled him. "What have you been up to?"

"I brought moss to the elders." Bloodpaw paused. "I was wondering, did you have a brother?"

Bloomfire looked startled by this question, her orange pelt prickling. She exchanged a glance with Flameheart, who looked uneasy.

Before his mother could answer, a yowl sounded from inside the nursery. Ashcloud and Copperstripe, who were pushing sticks into the roof of the warriors den, froze, looking to the nursery. After a moment, Dewstorm poked his head out of the nursery. "Rosebreeze is kitting," He announced, looking around. "Hawkfeather-"

"I'm coming." The tabby raced into the den, and Dewstorm ducked back into the den.

"Rosebreeze?" Brownstripe abandoned his work on the den and bounded across the clearing to the nursery, peering inside anxiously. "Can I come in?"

"No, we need room." Hawkfeather meowed. "You can come in soon enough."

As Brownstripe sighed and sat down, Diamondrain led her kits away from the nursery. "Come, you don't want to get in the way."

"What's going on?" Coldkit asked anxiously, his blue eyes wide as he looked back at the nursery.

"What's wrong with Rosebreeze?" Mistykit added, sounding frightened. "Is she hurt?"

Diamondrain let out a purr. "No, no." She sat near the warriors den, and the kits joined her, staring at the nursery. "Her kits are coming, that's all."

"Coming?" Coldkit echoed, staring up at her. "From where?"

Their mother purred. "That's a conversation for another day."

Bloodpaw sat near his parents, his question forgotten as he looked at the nursery. Many other cats had abandoned their duties to see what was happening.

"ShadowClan is lucky to have so many kits being born," Ashcloud

commented.

"It means more mouths to feed." Cliffshade twitched is tail. "Leaf-bare is hard enough."

Stripednose and Song sat close together. Boost stood near them, twitching his tail. "Kits are gross!"

"Boost!" Song glared at her brother. "Kits are wonderful! I hope to have some one day when-" She broke off and lowered her head, casting Stripednose an embarrassed look. "I-I mean..."

Her mate let out a purr, his blue eyes shining before he closed them and rubbed his muzzle against hers. "Of course."

"Everyone!" Cobratail padded across the clearing, twitching his tail. "I hate to ruin the moment, but we need to continue clearing snow and strengthening the dens. A kitting won't put leaf-bare on hold." The cats slowly returned to their duties, all but Brownstripe, who sat outside of the nursery, his tail twitching nervously.

I should help too. Bloodpaw thought, and looked around, spotting some twigs that some cat had left on the ground. He snatched them up and hurried to the elders den, reaching up and beginning to weave the twigs into the roof. After a while, he paused, looking to the nursery. Brownstripe was pacing back and forth, pausing occasionally to look at the nursery before continuing. *Did Flameheart do that when I was kitted?* He wondered.

"Do you need some help?"

As thought his thoughts had summoned him, Flameheart padded over to him, his ginger tabby pelt vibrant against the snow.

"Sure," Bloodpaw nodded gratefully at his father, and the two cats began mending the den together. A yowl came from the nursery, and he looked toward it. "Is she alright?"

"Yes," Flameheart responded. "It's normal. There's nothing to worry about."

Bloodpaw frowned. "Do accidents ever happen during a kitting?"

His father was quiet for a moment. "Sometimes."

"Congratulations, Brownstripe." Hawkfeather padded out of the den, nodding at the anxious warrior. "You're a father to three she-kits."

The tabby's eyes lit with delight. "Really? Let me see!" He hurried into the den. "Rosebreeze!"

For the first time, Bloodpaw felt happiness and respect for his mentor. Seeing him so happy made him happy as well. *I wonder if I'll ever have a family...*

***

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather for a clan meeting!"

Bloodpaw sat down among his clanmates, looking at Depthstar, who stood on the meeting rock. It was nearly sunset now. No cat had seen much of Brownstripe all day. His mentor had only left the nursery to fetch a mouse for Rosebreeze, and to announce the names of the kits: Creamkit, Tinykit, and Honeykit. Many cats had gone in to see them, including Depthstar, Brownstripe's father.

He looked around, wanting to talk to Swiftpaw. But to his surprise, he didn't see the black and white apprentice anywhere. He wasn't in the camp. In fact, neither were Revengepaw and Poisonedsap. *Did they go on patrol?* He wondered. *I don't remember Cobratail sending any out recently...*

"ShadowClan is so fortunate to have so many kits," Depthstar began. "They are the future of the clan, and more important to have than anything." He paused. "However, leaf-bare will be hard, and more warriors and apprentices will be needed for hunting. And so it is time for two of our kits to become apprentices." He looked across the clearing. "Mistykit, Coldkit. Come forward."

Mistykit and Coldkit? Bloodpaw blinked in surprise, watching the two gray kits hurry to stand before the meeting rock. *Are they six moons already?* He'd lost track. But as he looked at them, he believed it at once. They were certainly big enough to be

apprentices, and their legs and tail had grown. The kitten fluff behind their ears was disappearing.

"Mistykit, Coldkit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed." Depthstar meowed, looking down at the two eager cats. "Mistykit, Coldkit, from this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Mistypaw and Coldpaw." The two young cats held up their heads proudly, tails waving.

"Stripednose, Song, you are ready to take on apprentices." The clan leader went on. "You are young, but wise and responsible. Stripednose, you will be mentor to Mistypaw. Song, you will mentor Coldpaw."

Mistypaw eagerly touched noses with Stripednose, her eyes lit with excitement, and Coldpaw did the same with Song. Depthstar twitched his tail. "Now, I trust that your relationship won't get in the way of training your apprentices," He teased.

Stripednose and Song looked embarrassed. "Of course not, Depthstar," She purred.

The clan began to chant the names of the new apprentices. "Mistypaw! Coldpaw!"

Bloodpaw opened his jaws to join in when he saw something out of the corner of his eye, and turned to look. Poisonedsap padded into the camp, followed by Revengepaw and Swiftpaw. The three cats looked wary for a moment, flashing quick glances around as though making sure no cat saw them. The golden brown she-cat murmured something to her kits, and they quickly joined the crowd of cats.

He saw Swiftpaw head for the apprentices den, and Bloodpaw quickly followed. "Hey!" The apprenticed stopped, glancing at Bloodpaw uneasily. "Where have you been?" He asked curiously.

Swiftpaw hesitated. "Out hunting."

He didn't believe him. He sniffed his friend's pelt, and Swiftpaw jerked back, narrowing his eyes. A scent he couldn't identify clung

to his fur. "You smell strange," Bloodpaw commented. "Where-"

Swiftpaw thrust his face close to Bloodpaw's. "Mind your own business!" He spat, blue eyes lit with frustration. He spun and raced away, leaving Bloodpaw in shock. *What did I say?*

"Bloodpaw! Bloodpaw!"

Mistypaw and Coldpaw ran to him, but he ignored them, staring after Swiftpaw.

"Isn't this great?" Coldpaw meowed. "We're apprentices like you!"

"We can train together!" His sister added.

Bloodpaw's pelt burned with irritation, still sour from his encounter with Swiftpaw. He turned on the young apprentices sharply. "You're not kits anymore!" He snapped, startling them. "You need to stay with your mentors, and focus on training! I don't have time for you!"

Mistypaw and Coldpaw stared at him, stunned. The silver she-cat stared at him, eyes lit with hurt. "But..."

Coldpaw narrowed his eyes, but Bloodpaw could tell he was upset too. "Come on, Mistypaw," He growled, lashing his tail as he turned away. "We don't need him."

"Yeah..." Mistypaw lowered his head, casting Bloodpaw a sad look before following her brother.

Guilt prickled through his pelt as he watched them walk away. *I didn't mean it! I'm sorry!* But something told him that he'd ruined his friendship with them. They wouldn't forgive him.

***

That night was the gathering. Bloodpaw sat near his clanmates, looking around nervously. Swiftpaw hadn't come. Neither had Flameheart or Bloomfire. He felt alone and vulnerable. He saw two apprentices talking together not far from him. He felt uneasy talking to cats from other clans. But if Swiftpaw, Mistypaw, and

Coldpaw wouldn't be friends with him anymore, perhaps cats from other clans were his only options. After some hesitation, he stood and approached them warily.

"I climbed the great sycamore once!" A dark black and brown tabby was boasting to the gray tabby. Bloodpaw knew at once that he was a ThunderClan cat. "And I brought down a huge squirrel."

The dark gray tabby tom purred. "You should see me chase down rabbits!"

Bloodpaw recognized him at once. It was Tornadopaw of WindClan. After a moment of hesitation, he stepped forward. "H-hello."

The two apprentices paused, looking at him. "Hi, ShadowClanner!" Tornadopaw spoke first.

Bloodpaw bristled. "How did you know I was from ShadowClan?"

"Your scent, mouse-brain," Darkpaw scoffed, and Tornadopaw purred in amusement.

"Oh," Bloodpaw's pelt burned with embarrassment. *Wow, great first impression!* "Of course." He hesitantly sat down with them. "You're Tornadopaw, right?"

The tabby narrowed his yellow eyes. "How'd you know?"

"Not by your scent." Bloodpaw purred, and the two chuckled. "I saw you when Gladestar said your name at a gathering."

"Oh, right." Tornadopaw nodded, and looked aside at the ThunderClan apprentice. "This is Darkpaw." The tabby dipped his head to Bloodpaw.

"What's it like in ShadowClan?" Tornadopaw asked. "I'd go crazy living under all those trees!"

Darkpaw bristled. "Hey, trees make us feel safe, and they're filled with prey!"

The gray tabby raised his head. "So are the moors!"

"But all that open space?" Darkpaw shuddered. "You're so vulnerable!"

"Well, at least we can see an enemy coming," Tornadopaw's eyes gleamed. "You can't."

Darkpaw snorted and looked at Bloodpaw. "Come on, help me out. We've got to defend the TreeClans."

"TreeClan!" Bloodpaw laughed. "The moors have nothing on the forest!" As the conversation went on, he felt more and more happy. It felt great to be a part of something. After a while, Tornadopaw asked, "Hey, what's your name?"

"Yeah, I forgot to ask!" Darkpaw exclaimed. "Sorry!"

"It's Bloodpaw," He replied. Silence answered him for a moment.

"Bloodpaw?" Darkpaw echoed, amber eyes bewildered. "What a weird name!"

"He must bleed a lot." Tornadopaw's eyes gleamed, and the apprentices broke into laughter.

Bloodpaw flattened his ears, his heart sinking. *No! Everything was going so well! I should have lied about my name!*

"He must be really dangerous!" Darkpaw purred. "What do you suppose his warrior name will be?"

"Something real dangerous! Like Bloodfang!"

"Bloodstrike!"

"Bloodface!"

The apprentices howled with laughter, and Bloodpaw backed away, hurt piercing through his heart. *It's just a name! You liked me before!* He returned to his clanmates miserably. *My stupid name! Why did my parents have to give me such a stupid name? I need to know! Why did you call me Bloodkit?*

***

When the gathering was over, Bloodpaw raced into the camp, heading straight for the warriors den. The question had been burning in his mind all night. *Why haven't I asked them before?* He wondered. *I should have!* He went into the warriors den, weaving around the sleeping cats and prodding his father. "Flameheart!" He whispered.

Flameheart awoke, blinking up at him drowsily. "Bloodpaw? What-"

"I need to ask you something!" Bloodpaw hissed.

"What's going on?" Bloomfire yawned as she woke. Bloodpaw opened his jaws to speak.

"Shh!" Cliffshade hissed from his nest, tucking his tail over his nose. "Some of us are trying to sleep."

"Sorry, Cliffshade," Bloomfire looked at Bloodpaw. "Let's go into the clearing where we won't disturb anyone." Bloodpaw turned, leading his parents out of the den. They went to the side of the clearing.

"Well?" Flameheart prompted. "What is it?"

"I need to know." Bloodpaw stared at them. "Why did you call me Bloodkit?"

The two cats looked hesitant to respond, exchanging a look.

"Why?" Bloodpaw repeated desperately. "Every cat mocks me because of it! It's the reason I've been hated my whole life!"

"You're not hated, Bloodpaw," Bloomfire murmured.

Bloodpaw twitched his tail. "Yes, I am! Please, tell me why you named me Bloodkit."

As Bloomfire hesitated, Flameheart jumped in. "The answer is obvious," He meowed. "Look at your pelt. We named you Bloodkit because of your red tabby fur."

"Well, why couldn't you have called me Redkit, or Russetkit?" Bloodpaw demanded. "That would have matched my pelt too! Why was "Blood" the first thing you thought of?"

Bloomfire stepped forward and licked his head. "Bloodpaw, calm down." She murmured. "A name is just a name. It doesn't define you. You were always meant to be Bloodkit. It was written in the stars."

"Sure." Bloodpaw looked down.

Flameheart turned away. "Go to sleep." He told him softly. "You have training tomorrow." His mother followed him, and Bloodpaw stared after them.

He let out a sigh and turned away, heading to his den. Revengepaw and Swiftpaw were curled up in their nests. Bloodpaw settled in his nest. After a while, he opened his eyes and looked at Swiftpaw. The black and white tom had his back to him. *Is he still mad at me? Is he awake?* "Swiftpaw?" Bloodpaw whispered.

His friend didn't respond, but his ear twitched. *He heard me.* Bloodpaw thought. *But he doesn't want to talk to me. I guess we aren't friends anymore...* He closed his eyes, struggling to fight the pain in his heart.

Chapter 12

[image]

"From this moment you will be known as Revengeheart and Swiftstalker. StarClan honors your courage and strength, and we welcome you as full warriors of ShadowClan."

Bloodpaw sat near the edge of the clearing, watching as the clan began to chant the names of the new warriors. They had certainly grown. Revengeheart stood tall, muscles rippling under his white pelt as he observed the clan, his thick tail twitching slowly back and forth. Swiftstalker was leaner than his brother, but still had some muscle under his sleek black and white pelt. Despite not being as strong as Revengeheart, Swiftstalker had grown into a fantastic hunter, hence his name. While training with Brownstripe, Bloodpaw would sometimes see his old friend stalking prey with an incredible amount of patience and strategy. He rarely missed a catch.

He longed to join in and congratulate his former friend, but he didn't think Swiftstalker wanted him to be anywhere near him.

Several moons had passed since the night Swiftstalker had yelled at him, and Bloodpaw hadn't received a word from him since. He had tried to approach the tom once to offer him a mouse, but he had quickly turned away to join Revengeheart, Poisonedsap, Blackstorm, Mottledface, and Foxshadow, a group of cats who had become inseparable. Bloodpaw found it strange that Poisonedsap wanted to hang out with so many younger warriors, but he assumed she just wanted to be around her kits.

For moons now, Bloodpaw kept himself quiet and isolated within the clan. Part of it was because of how Tornadopaw and Darkpaw had made fun of him at that gathering. Part of it was because of Swiftstalker's rejection of him. Part of it was how harshly he'd been to Mistypaw and Coldpaw, who didn't speak to him either. Part of it

was knowing that no cat would ever trust him because of his name. The only cats he spoke to these days were his parents, and of course, Brownstripe during training.

But recently, even Flameheart and Bloomfire pushed him away, constantly asking to give them time to be alone. Bloodpaw was hurt by that, and he couldn't understand why they didn't want him around.

"Revengeheart! Swiftstalker!" Poisonedsap trotted out of the nursery to greet her sons, who now matched her height. Her eyes gleamed as she nuzzled them both. "I'm so proud of you."

A moon ago, Poisonedsap and Cougarfoot's kits had arrived. The little gray and black tom was Spiderkit. His sister was an orange and gold she-cat named Amberkit. The last kit was Falconkit, a dark ginger tabby tom with black tufted ears.

Depthstar dipped his head and prepared to leap down from the meeting rock when Bloomfire stood. "I have something to say," She announced.

The dark blue-gray tom paused and sat back down as several cats turned to look at the orange and white warrior. "What is it, Bloomfire?"

Bloodpaw looked at his mother, blinking. She and Flameheart sat close together, looking excited and proud. *What's going on?* He wondered.

His parents exchanged a warm look before Bloomfire spoke. "Flameheart and I are expecting kits," She purred. As the clan began to crowd the two cats, purring congratulations, Bloodpaw stared in shock. *Kits! Of course! That's why they wanted me to give them time alone!* His heart raced with delight for the first time in moons. *I'm going to have brothers and sisters! I'll have more kin!*

He let out a purr and bounded over to his parents, pushing through Greenpine and Ashcloud to press his head against his mother's. "This is great!" He blurted out. "I'm so happy for you!" He turned and bumped his head affectionately against Flameheart's shoulder,

and his parents purred loudly.

Bloomfire wrapped her tail around Bloodpaw, nuzzling him. "You're going to be a great brother, Bloodpaw," She purred.

***

Later that day, Bloodpaw went out into the forest to hunt with Brownstripe. He sprang onto a mouse and swiftly delivered the killing bite, the sharp tang of blood hitting his tongue.

"Well done," Brownstripe praised, padding to his apprentice's side. "You've become a fine hunter. I don't think there's much more I can teach you."

Bloodpaw looked up at his mentor, pricking his ears forward. It wasn't often he got a compliment out of Brownstripe. "Really?"

The tabby nodded. "Why don't you go hunting over there?" He suggested, waving his tail toward the marsh. "There should be plenty of frogs out with green-leaf on the way."

"Okay." Bloodpaw headed for the marsh, crouching in the tall grass. He slowly began to stalk forward.

Crrrooooaaak

Bloodpaw froze. Frog! He spotted the rubbery creature crouched ahead of him close to the water's edge, throat puffing in and out as it croaked. He narrowed his eyes and crept closer, but the frog seemed to hear him and sprang into a tall clump of grass by the shore. With a soft growl, Bloodpaw leaped after it, claws outstretched as he crashed through the other side of the grass. To his surprise, a tabby tom spun to face him, nearly jumping out of his pelt as he yowled out, dropping the herbs he'd been carrying.

Bloodpaw awkwardly stumbled to the ground in front of him, sheathing his claws. "Hawkfeather!"

The medicine cat leaned away from Bloodpaw, staring at him with wide, stunned eyes. His fur was fluffed up twice his size. "Great StarClan, Bloodpaw!" He gasped. "Are you trying to give me a heart

attack?"

[image]

"Sorry!" Bloodpaw apologized awkwardly, ducking his head. "I-I was chasing a frog." The mottled tom still looked like he was in shock. Bloodpaw could only imagine how Hawkfeather had felt, quietly gathering herbs, then having the cat he despised leap out at him.

Hawkfeather eyed him warily, still looking on guard. "Shouldn't you be with your mentor?"

"Brownstripe sent me to hunt on my own," Bloodpaw responded.

The tabby nodded and glanced down, his thick tail lashing slowly. Bloodpaw shuffled his paws as an awkward silence built between them. "So..." Bloodpaw dared to break the silence, staring at Hawkfeather nervously. "What are you doing?"

Hawkfeather flattened his ears. "I *was* gathering herbs, until you scared me out of my fur," He growled.

He looked down and saw the tall, bristly leaves he'd caused him to drop scattered on the ground. "Oh." He quickly crouched and began gathering them together. "Let me help you with-"

Be careful!" Hawkfeather spat, and Bloodpaw drew back nervously.

"Sorry," Bloodpaw hesitated. "Can I help with anything?"

Hawkfeather hesitated, his tail swishing slowly back and forth as he studied him. "I suppose you could look for more horsetail."

"Okay." He hesitated. "W-what does horsetail look like?"

The medicine cat huffed out a sigh. "What do you think, mouse-brain?" He growled, flicking his tail at the bristly leaves by his paws.

"Oh." Bloodpaw dipped his head and began sniffing along the marsh for the plant. He noticed Hawkfeather constantly eying him, as though he expected Bloodpaw to attack when his back was turned.

He tried to ignore the medicine cat's menacing stare, nipping off a stalk of horsetail. But as he returned to Hawkfeather with it, he felt that it was time he asked him the question that had been burning in his mind since he was a kit.

"You've never liked me," Bloodpaw meowed, meeting his gaze. "Why?"

Hawkfeather's fur bristled for a moment. He stared back at Bloodpaw steadily, but seemed hesitant to respond.

Bloodpaw twitched his tail. "What did I ever do wrong?" He asked.

The mottled tabby lowered his head, and Bloodpaw thought he saw guilt in his eyes, but it only lasted for a moment. "Nothing." He murmured. "Yet." Bloodpaw was about to press for more information, but the medicine cat picked up his herbs and started walking away. "You should get back to your mentor."

He stared after the medicine cat, his mind whirling with questions. *Why does Hawkfeather think I'll do harm one day? I would never hurt anyone! Ever!*

Chapter 13

[image]

Bloodpaw sat outside the nursery, his tail twitching impatiently. He longed to see what was happening inside. Was Bloomfire alright? How many kits would there be? Would they be healthy? A little ways from him, Poisonedsap sat with her kits leaping around her restlessly.

"When can we go back in?" Spiderkit demanded, waving his black tail. "We left our mossball in there!"

"Yeah!" Amberkit added, looking disappointed. "We weren't finished playing."

Their mother flicked them on the ears. "We'll go back as soon as Bloomfire's kits arrive," She meowed.

Falconkit looked up at her impatiently. "How long will that take?"

She narrowed her dark amber eyes. "It depends on how well the kitting goes."

Poisonedsap's words made Bloodpaw anxious. "Will something go wrong?" He asked anxiously. "Will Bloomfire be okay?"

The golden brown she-cat didn't respond. As Bloodpaw's stomach churned with anxiety, a white she-cat padded to his side, and he turned to see Song looking at him sympathetically. "Don't worry, Bloodpaw," She told him. "Your mother will be fine. She's in good paws."

He still felt uneasy. "Will Dewstorm be able to handle it on his own?" It had been two moons since Bloodpaw's encounter with Hawkfeather in the forest. Just one day later, the medicine cat had been found dead in their territory with horrible teethmarks in his throat. The clan had been shocked and ready to accuse ThunderClan, however, no ThunderClan scent was found near the

body. Depthstar concluded that Hawkfeather must have been murdered by a rogue. Patrols had been increased since then, and every cat was on the lookout for trespassers, and Hawkfeather's potential killer. Dewstorm had taken over the role of ThunderClan's sole medicine cat. Bloodpaw guiltily felt a little safer with Hawkfeather gone, no longer having to catch the medicine cat's accusing stare. *But he didn't deserve to die...*

"Of course," Song assured him. "Dewstorm helped with many kittings, and even handled some on his own when Hawkfeather was busy. He has plenty of experience."

Bloodpaw dipped his head, grateful for the she-cat's support. "Thank you." He paused, noticing Stripednose across the clearing. "Will you be in the nursery soon?"

Song's blue eyes widened, and she flicked her tail at his ear playfully. "Quiet, Bloodpaw!" She purred.

As he purred, he saw movement from the corner of his eye and snapped his attention to the nursery. Dewstorm padded out, looking weary, but happiness gleamed in his eyes. "You can go in, Bloodpaw."

Bloodpaw's heartbeat quickened with excitement, and he hesitated before ducking into the nursery, brushing past Dewstorm as he left. The moment he entered the den, warmth spread through him from ears to tail tip. His mother lay in her nest with four little bundles at her belly. Her eyes were closed contently. Flameheart sat over them. "Bloodpaw," He turned to look at his son. He'd never seen his father so happy. *Was he like that when I was born?*

Bloomfire opened her eyes and blinked warmly at him. "Come meet your brothers and sisters."

Bloodpaw's heart swelled as he padded closer and peered down at the kits. They were all different shades of orange and gold. Flameheart pointed his tail at a little orange-red tabby tom. "This is Cardinalkit," He purred. "The orange and white she-cat is Foxkit."

"The dark ginger and white tom is Heatkit," Bloomfire murmured,

rasping her tongue over the little kit's head. "And the yellow tabby she-cat is Applekit."

Bloodpaw purred loudly, admiring the kits. *They're my kin! I finally have more kin in the clan. And they'll like me!* "They're amazing." He touched his nose to his mother's, and Flameheart wrapped his tail around him. For the first time in moons, Bloodpaw felt a warm sense of belonging. *Even if I don't have the clan, I'll always have my family.* He thought. *They're all I need.*

[image]

***

A few days had passed. Bloomfire's kits were growing strongly, and Bloodpaw visited them every day after his training. But he wasn't sure if he would get to see them tonight. Bloodpaw padded into the camp, breathing hard. He had just returned from night training with Brownstripe at the burnt sycamore. His paws ached, and he longed for his nest. *I hope he doesn't expect me to get up at dawn tomorrow!* He thought. A half moon hung brightly in the sky. He shivered as a cold breeze ruffled his fur, and imagined curling up into his warm nest, drifting into a deep, pleasant sleep.

But first, he wanted to see Bloomfire's kits. He wanted to develop a connection with them, and if he didn't keep visiting them, they might forget him. *I can't lose them.* He thought. *Not like I did Mistypaw and Coldpaw...* He guessed that the kits would be asleep this late at night, but he figured he'd check anyway.

He had almost reached the den when a dark blur shot out of the leader's den, blue eyes wide. Bloodpaw nearly jumped out of his fur, stopping in his tracks. "Depthstar?" He stared at him. "Is everything okay?"

The dark blue-gray tom looked distant, his eyes lit with anxiety. "No," He sounded uncertain, which scared Bloodpaw. "Something's wrong!" The clan leader always spoke with such certainty and control. But now, he sounded afraid.

His fur bristled, and he hurried to his leader's side. "What is it?" He

asked nervously. "Rogues? Is-"

"It's Dewstorm," Depthstar breathed anxiously. "Starfaith just told me that something has happened to Dewstorm!"

Starfaith? Bloodpaw blinked in confusion. *She's WindClan's medicine cat apprentice! And she certainly isn't here!* He knew that all the medicine cats would be at the moonstone now, where they met every half moon to share tongues with StarClan. The medicine cats should all be at their camps now. He froze. *Then why hasn't Dewstorm-*

"We have to go!" Depthstar headed for the thorn tunnel. "We have to go to highstones, now!"

Bloodpaw hesitated, his fur fluffed up at the urgency of the situation. "Shall I fetch Cobra-"

"No, there's no time!" The tom hissed sharply. "Come with me, Bloodpaw! We must hurry!" Without a word, the dark tom pelted out of the clearing, and Bloodpaw had no choice but to follow his leader.

His heart pounded hard in his chest as he pelted through the cold night after his leader, him paws drumming against the forest floor. His body ached from his training as he ran, but thinking about Dewstorm kept him going. *He's in trouble! He and Depthstar need me!* They reached the base of highstones and Bloodpaw paused, panting heavily.

Depthstar paused several fox lengths ahead of him, glaring over his shoulder. "There's no time to rest!" He hissed. "Come on!" The dark tom pelted up the rocks, and Bloodpaw forced himself onward. *Come on, keep going!* He urged his exhausted muscles as he scrambled up the rocky incline.

As they headed further up highstones, Bloodpaw detected some new scents that sent shivers down his spine. The scent wafted up his nose, thick and strong. *Blood! So much blood!* Terror bolted through him. *Oh, StarClan, don't let Dewstorm be dead!* They had almost reached the moonstone cave when Depthstar halted, letting out a

gasp. "No!"

Bloodpaw panted as he leaped to his leader's side, his paws trembling and aching. He looked up at the scene and froze. *Great StarClan, no!*

Something horrible had happened here. Blood stained the rocks, the air reeking with mingled scents of fear, blood, and rogue. A small yellow she-cat lay against one of the rocks, her fur soaked in so much blood, it took Bloodpaw a moment to recognize her. *Starfaith!* Not far from her, Dewstorm lay on his side in a pool of his own blood. *Oh, no!*

"Dewstorm!" Depthstar shot to his medicine cat's side, nosing his fur. "Can you hear me?"

Bloodpaw felt dizzy with fear and sick at the heavy scent of blood clinging to the air. But he forced himself to stumble over to Starfaith to see if she was alive. He leaned over her, and his stomach turned. Blood pulsed heavily from a wound in her throat. Her yellow eyes were wide and glazed over. He hesitantly touched her shoulder with his paw, but the she-cat didn't move, and her body was cold and stiff. "She's dead." He called out solemnly to Depthstar.

"I know," His leader replied, sounding as though he'd known all along. Suddenly, Bloodpaw understood. *Starfaith is dead... She must have visited Depthstar to tell him about Dewstorm!* Bloodpaw hurried to his leader's side and drew in a deep breath. Dewstorm had several slashes in his shoulder, and a long rip in his belly. Depthstar was pressing his paws to the long wound, desperate to stop the bleeding.

"Is-" Bloodpaw choked out. "Is he-" Before he could finish, The spotted gray tom jerked and began to cough.

"Dewstorm!" Depthstar sounded relieved as the tom began drawing in deep, ragged breaths. "It's alright-"

"Starfaith," Dewstorm moaned, shakily trying to raise his head. "Starfaith... She needs help..!"

"Hold still." Depthstar pressed his dark paws against the medicine cat's belly. "Bloodpaw, go find some cobwebs, leaves, anything to stop the bleeding."

Bloodpaw immediately raced to the side of the rocks where bushes grew, searching for cobwebs or soft leaves. Come on, come on! He searched desperately, then spotted some thick wads of cobweb between two bushes. He grabbed them and raced back to Dewstorm, placing them at Depthstar's paws. His leader quickly pressed them to the medicine cat's wound.

"Where is she?" Dewstorm croaked. "Where's Starfaith?"

Depthstar wasn't responding, so Bloodpaw did. "I'm sorry," He rasped. "She... She's dead."

The gray spotted tom stared at Bloodpaw for a moment, as though processing this, then let out a low wail. "No!" He whimpered, dropping his head to the ground again.

"What happened?" Depthstar demanded, his blue eyes lit with anxiety. "Who did this?" The medicine cat didn't respond, and Depthstar prodded his side. "Dewstorm?"

Alarm shot through Bloodpaw. "Is he-"

"He's unconscious." The tom drew in a deep breath. "We need to get him to camp."

"What about Starfaith?" Bloodpaw asked, casting a glance at the dead she-cat.

Depthstar paused, looking over at the dead she-cat. He padded over to her body, and Bloodpaw instinctively followed, though when he got there, he realized that he shouldn't have. *This is meant to be a private moment.*

The ShadowClan leader lowered his head and touched his nose to the yellow she-cat's ear. "Thank you for leading me to Dewstorm," He whispered. "May you walk safely among the stars." After a moment, he turned away and met Bloodpaw's solemn gaze. "We need to take care of Dewstorm first. Carry Starfaith's body into the

cave. She'll be safe there until her clanmates arrive."

Bloodpaw nodded and stepped closer, lowering his head and gently grasping her by her scruff. He was surprised at how light she was as he pulled her over to the cave. He hesitated before entering. *This is a place for leaders and medicine cats... Will StarClan be angry with me for being here?* He thought about this as he dragged the dead medicine cat through the dark tunnel. *No.* He decided. *They'll understand...*

He entered the cave and drew in a deep breath through his nose. The moonstone shone brighter than anything Bloodpaw had ever seen. It was no wonder they called it the moonstone. It was as though a piece of the moon had fallen into the cave. *It's beautiful... And medicine cats get to see this every half moon?*

He gently rested Starfaith beside the moonstone. The light reflected onto her pelt, giving her fur a pale yellow glow. Bloodpaw hesitated, figuring that he owed her the same words Depthstar had given. "Thank you," He whispered. "All of ShadowClan thanks you."

"Your path has been a difficult one, Bloodpaw." A voice meowed from beside him, and Bloodpaw nearly leaped out of his fur. He looked aside and gasped. Starfaith stood beside him, her pelt shimmering with stars in the moonlight. Her yellow eyes glowed like the moonstone. Bloodpaw looked from her body to the cat standing beside him, numb with shock. He couldn't speak.

"Dewstorm believes in you," Starfaith purred in his ear. "So I know I can believe in you, too. All of StarClan is watching you."

Bloodpaw couldn't breath. He'd met a StarClan cat before in his dreams. But this was reality. It felt even stranger than before.

"Have no fear, young one," Starfaith went on softly. "StarClan has set you on the right path. But you must have the courage to follow it."

"What do you mean?" Bloodpaw managed to get out the words, unable to take his eyes off the starlit cat. "What path?"

"Revenge will guide you," She murmured.

Bloodpaw's spine tingled as she spoke the same words the red tabby kept repeating to him. "You know about the prophecy?" He breathed.

"Bloodpaw!"

He looked back at Depthstar's yowl, then swung his head to Starfaith. "I-" He broke off. The she-cat's spirit was gone. He was alone with her body once more.

"Bloodpaw, what's taking so long?" Depthstar demanded from outside of the cave. "Dewstorm doesn't have much time!"

"Save him." He heard Starfaith breath in his ear, but the she-cat was nowhere to be seen. Bloodpaw looked at her body for a moment, then raced out of the cave. "I'm coming!"

Depthstar was standing with Dewstorm on his back, his paws dangling at the clan leader's sides. "Come on," He urged, and he and Bloodpaw hurried down highstones.

***

When they reached the camp, most of the clan was still sleeping. But a few cats roamed the clearing. Greenpine and Cliffshade spoke quietly together, and Copperstripe was just leaving the dirtplace.

Cobratail sat near Depthstar's den, clearly uneasy at the leader being suddenly absent. When he saw he, Bloodpaw, and Dewstorm, his black ears flattened in alarm. "What happened?" He leaped to their side, and the other cats looked to Dewstorm in alarm.

"Looks like Dewstorm and Starfaith were attacked by rogues," Depthstar explained quickly as he carried the wounded cat to the medicine den. "Starfaith is dead. Dewstorm is badly wounded."

Cobratail's eyes widened. "You don't think it was Deserve-"

"No." Depthstar lowered Dewstorm into his nest. "We haven't seen him for seasons." He paused, looking into the clearing. "Greenpine!

Cliffshade!" He hissed, and the two cats raced over.

"Is he alright?" Greenpine gasped.

"Who did this?" Cliffshade growled, flexing his claws.

"Be quiet!" Depthstar urged. "If we wake the rest of the clan, we'll only cause panic." He paused. "Cliffshade, Cobratail, I need you to go to WindClan at once and tell them that Starfaith has been killed at highstones. They need to fetch her body."

The two warriors raced away, leaving Bloodpaw, Greenpine, Depthstar, and the wounded medicine cat.

Depthstar's eyes lit with fear. "We need a medicine cat," He rasped. "Dewstorm needs more than cobwebs, and we don't know what to do." He looked at Greenpine and Bloodpaw. "I need you two to go to ThunderClan and get Spicewhisker."

Greenpine hesitated. "I-I'm sorry, Depthstar, I can't."

The clan leader flattened his ears, looking bewildered. "Why?"

"I'm expecting kits," The tabby admitted. "I was going to announce I was moving into the nursery tomorrow."

"Right," Depthstar murmured, sounding scared. "You shouldn't run all that way." His gaze rested on Bloodpaw, who froze as the tom spoke. "Bloodpaw, you need to go to the ThunderClan camp and ask for Spicewhisker."

His eyes widened. "On my own? On enemy territory?"

"Yes, you know the way. Remember from the battle? Go."

"But-" Bloodpaw protested.

"Bloodpaw!" Depthstar's eyes shone with despair. "You have to do this! Dewstorm's life depends on it! Go, now!"

With a last look at Dewstorm, Bloodpaw spun and raced out of the camp. *I can do this! I have to do this!*

Chapter 14

[image]

Bloodpaw's heart pounded as he sprinted through the cold forest. His pads hurt with each stride, and he wondered if they were bleeding. He'd been awake all night, and between his training and the trek to and from the moonstone, his whole body was begging for rest. But he didn't dare stop. Dewstorm was dying. Depthstar was counting on him.

He reached the thunderpath and paused, his stomach churning with unease. He'd only crossed this once, and Swiftstalker had been at his side. Now, he was alone. And it was night. How would he be able to see the monsters coming?

Forget it! You have to cross! Bloodpaw prepared to run, then froze as a set of lights appeared in the distance. He turned his head and bristled. *Great StarClan!* A monster roared along the path toward him, glaring at him, *glowing* at him with blinding yellow eyes. *It looks so angry!* He crouched, eyes round as the monster passed him. *Well, at least I'll be able to see them coming!* He looked from side to side, and couldn't see any more lights nearing. He drew in a deep breath and bounded across the thunderpath, the hard stone causing his sore pads to hurt even more.

He felt scared and vulnerable as he crossed into ThunderClan territory. The last time he had been here, he had been with his clan launching a surprise attack. He figured most of the clan was asleep, so he didn't have to worry about patrols. But the camp would be guarded. This was confirmed when he neared the camp, crouching in the bushes. He peered out at two ThunderClan warriors guarding the entrance, looking drowsy.

Okay... I don't want to seem aggressive... Oh, StarClan, help me! Bloodpaw swallowed nervously before stepping out of the bushes. "H-hello!"

The two warriors blinked their tiredness away, looking alarmed at

first, then defensive, their fur fluffing up. One of the warriors bared his teeth. "ShadowClan!"

"I come in peace!" Bloodpaw meowed quickly, dipping his head. "I-"

"Who are you?" One warrior growled. "Come to attack us again?"

"No!" Bloodpaw's heart pounded nervously as he faced the warriors, keeping a fair distance. "I'm Bloodpaw of ShadowClan. Depthstar-"

One guard bristled. "What do you want?"

If you hadn't cut me off, I would have told you! Bloodpaw thought. "Depthstar sent me," He explained. "There was a rogue attack at highstones. Starfaith is dead, and Dewstorm can't hold on for much longer." He swallowed. "He sent me to fetch Spice-"

"What's going on?"

He froze, staring up nervously as Strawberrystar emerged from the thorn tunnel, narrowing her amber eyes at him. "Why is a ShadowClan apprentice on our territory?"

"Strawberrystar," Bloodpaw dipped his head respectfully to the she-cat, aware of her sharp tongue and knowing that one wrong word could rub her the wrong way. "There was an attack at highstones. Two of the medicine cats were there, Dewstorm and Starfaith. Starfaith is dead, and Dewstorm is barely holding on."

The spotted she-cat twitched her ear. "And how is this ThunderClan's problem?" She demanded.

Bloodpaw's heart pounded. "Depthstar sent me to fetch Spicewhisker," He meowed, staring at her nervously. "Please, can he come to ShadowClan to save Dewstorm?"

To his dismay, the ThunderClan leader snorted. "You think I'm going to lend my medicine cat to ShadowClan?" He demanded. "The clan who accused my clan of murder, and launched an unjustified attack on us? *Killed* one of my warriors?"

Bloodpaw stared at her desperately. "Please, Dewstorm is dying!"

"Get off my territory, apprentice," Strawberrystar growled. "Before I let my warriors tear you apart."

Bloodpaw's fur bristled with fear, but he stood his ground. "If you don't do something, ShadowClan will be left without a medicine cat! StarClan would not allow this!" Strawberrystar waved her tail in signal, and the guards stalked toward him aggressively. Bloodpaw braced himself for the attack.

"Strawberrystar!"

He saw a small white muzzled black tom appear at his leader's side, and Bloodpaw recognized him at once. *Spicewhisker!* Hope filled his chest.

The medicine cat stared at Bloodpaw anxiously. "Is that right?" He gasped. "Dewstorm is dying? Starfaith is dead?"

Bloodpaw nodded and Spicewhisker started toward him. Strawberrystar stretched a paw out in front of him, glaring at him. "What do you think you're doing?"

Spicewhisker blinked at his leader. "I need to save Dewstorm."

The ThunderClan leader bared her teeth. "We will not do any favors for ShadowClan!" She hissed. "Not after they attacked us and accused us of murder!"

Bloodpaw hesitantly stepped forward. "Strawberrystar, please listen to me," He begged. "ShadowClan regrets the attack."

Strawberrystar's eyes flashed with surprise, and she flicked an ear, waiting for him to go on.

"After tonight's attack, it has to have been a rogue that killed our warriors," Bloodpaw went on, trembling nervously. "On behalf of ShadowClan, I apologize, and ask for your forgiveness. Please, save our medicine cat. Don't make Dewstorm suffer for our mistakes."

The ThunderClan leader was quiet for a moment, as though reflecting on Bloodpaw's words. Spicewhisker was looking at his leader calmly. "You know I rarely disobey you, Strawberrystar," He

meowed. "But I will not let Dewstorm die. He's a fellow medicine cat."

Bloodpaw stared at Strawberrystar hopefully. *Please..!*

"Very well," She murmured at last. "You may go."

Relief flooded over him. *Thank Starclan!* The leader stepped aside, and Spicewhisker padded forward to meet him. "Lead the way, Bloodpaw."

***

Bloodpaw raced through the forest with Spicewhisker at his side. "I can't believe this happened." The medicine cat panted as they ran. "I just got back from highstones a while ago."

"Why were Dewstorm and Starfaith alone?" Bloodpaw asked. "Weren't you and the other medicine cats with them?"

"Dewstorm and Starfaith stayed behind to talk alone for a moment," Spicewhisker meowed as they crossed into ShadowClan territory. "Starfaith told Silverberry she'd catch up, and the rest of us left."

They reached the camp, and Bloodpaw led Spicewhisker into the medicine den where Depthstar and Greenpine were crouched over Dewstorm. They looked relieved to see Bloodpaw with the ThunderClan medicine cat at his heels.

"Spicewhisker!" Depthstar sighed. "Thank StarClan." He looked at Bloodpaw as the black and white tom crouched beside Dewstorm. "Well done, Bloodpaw."

Bloodpaw felt a rush of pride and sat near the den entrance, watching as Spicewhisker applied herbs to Dewstorm's wounds.

***

The earliest sign of dawn peered over the horizon, slightly lightening the dark sky. It had been a long time since Spicewhisker arrived. He was still in the medicine den with Dewstorm, whose fate was uncertain.

At this point, most of the clan had awoken to see what the commotion was about. The queens, kits, and elders were the only cats sleeping. The rest of the clan gathered in the clearing, speaking quietly together.

"Do you think he'll be alright?" Cliffshade murmured.

"What if he dies, and ShadowClan is left without a medicine cat?" Ashcloud sounded nervous.

Copperstripe lowered his head. "StarClan will tell us what to do."

"Are any of the kits qualified to be medicine cats?"

"Enough!" Diamondrain snapped, her eyes lit with fear. "Don't talk like he's already dead!" Dewstorm was her brother. Of course she was more scared for him than the rest of the clan.

Bloodpaw sat at the side of the clearing, his eyes closed. He was exhausted. His paws were sore, and his whole body ached. His body longed for sleep, but he refused to give in. He couldn't sleep. Not until he found out if Dewstorm was going to make it.

After what felt like forever, Spicewhisker emerged from the medicine den, murmuring a few words to Depthstar. The dark blue-gray tom nodded. "Thank you," He murmured, turning to his clan. "Dewstorm needs a few days to recover. But he has been saved, thanks to Spicewhisker." The clan let out sighs and murmurs of relief and gratitude toward the ThunderClan medicine cat.

Depthstar and Spicewhisker headed for the camp entrance, not far from where Bloodpaw sat. The two cats paused, and Depthstar looked at the medicine cat. "I can't thank you enough," He meowed. "I'm surprised Strawberrystar allowed you to go after the battle."

"Oh, Bloodpaw explained everything," Spicewhisker meowed. "He apologized on your behalf and explained that it was rogues who killed your cats."

Bloodpaw froze as Depthstar's eyes flashed with surprise. He hadn't thought about it before, but now he realized what he'd done. *I lied on ShadowClan's behalf! Depthstar still thinks ThunderClan killed our*

warriors! We never regretted the attack! What have I done?

"Yes." Depthstar meowed after a moment.

"I hope you find those rogues." Spicewhisker meowed. "Farewell," The small tom left the camp. Depthstar watched him for a moment, then rested his gaze on Bloodpaw. Bloodpaw's heart lurched as the clan leader approached him. *He's going to be so angry with me!*

Depthstar stopped in front of him. "You spoke for me?" He asked, his expression giving nothing away.

Bloodpaw lowered his head, shame burning through him. "Yes," He rasped. "I-I'm sorry-"

"You did well."

Depthstar's response startled him, and he stared up at his leader. "W-what?"

The tom twitched his ear. "I always questioned whether attacking ThunderClan was right," He meowed. "And after tonights attack, I'm fairly certain that Maplefur and Milkblaze were killed by rogues, just as Hawkfeather and Starfaith were. I meant to tell Strawberrystar this at the next gathering and apologize for our actions." He tipped his head. "But you did it for me. And at a time when our relations with ThunderClan needed to be mended. Thank you."

Bloodpaw was taken back. *He's not mad at me! And I did the right thing!* He dipped his head respectfully.

Depthstar studied him for a moment, then turned away. Bloodpaw watched the dark tom leap onto the meeting rock. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather for a clan meeting!"

Bloodpaw joined the rest of his clanmates. He realized that Revengeheart, Swiftstalker, Mottledface, and Blackstorm were absent. *Strange...*

The queens and elders padded out of their dens, blinking away sleep. "Great StarClan, Depthstar!" Buzzardglare huffed. "The sun

hasn't even risen! What could be so important?"

"Listen and you'll find out, Buzzardglare," Depthstar responded. When the whole clan was gathered, he went on. "Tonight, a horrible attack occured at highstones. Starfaith of WindClan was killed, and Dewstorm was close to joining her in StarClan, but has been saved by Spicewhisker of ThunderClan." He paused, resting his eyes on Bloodpaw. "Dewstorm is alive thanks to one brave apprentice, Bloodpaw."

He froze as the clan turned to look at him, feeling mingled pride and embarrassment burn through his pelt.

"Bloodpaw came with me to highstones and helped me bring Dewstorm home," Depthstar went on. "And even traveled to the ThunderClan camp on his own to get Spicewhisker. Bloodpaw has shown a great amount of courage and loyalty tonight." Some cats were giving him nods of approval, while others glared at him coldly. He saw Flameheart and Bloomfire sitting near the nursery, eyes blazing with pride.

Depthstar spoke again. "I rarely make warriors at this hour. But I see no better time. I, Depthstar, leader of ShadowClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice."

Bloodpaw's head spun as the leader spoke, his mind racing. *What? Wait- Is-*

"He has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend him to you as a warrior in his turn."

Is he making me a warrior? He's making me a warrior! Bloodpaw couldn't breath.

"Bloodpaw," Depthstar rested his eyes on him. "Come forward."

Bloodpaw swallowed and headed to the foot of the meeting rock, staring up at his leader in amazement.

"Bloodpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?" Depthstar meowed, staring down at him.

"I do." Bloodpaw breathed, his heart pounding. He remembered all those moons ago when he had been a kit, fearing that Depthstar would never make him a warrior. Swiftstalker had promised to follow him around throwing mossballs at his head if he refused. Warmth blazed through his heart at the thought of his old friend. *What ever changed between us?*

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name." Depthstar declared. "Bloodpaw, from this moment you will be known as Bloodfur. StarClan honors your courage and loyalty, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ShadowClan."

Bloodfur's heart raced with excitement. *Great StarClan, I did it! I'm a warrior!* Depthstar leaped down from the rock and rested his chin on his head, and Bloodfur licked his shoulder, as customary.

"Bloodfur! Bloodfur!"

Some cats exchanged uneasy looks. Not everyone chanted. But those who mattered did. Cobratail, Greenpine, and several other warriors joined in, along with his parents. The next thing he knew, Flameheart and Bloomfire were at his sides, weaving around him.

"Well done, Bloodfur," Flameheart purred. "You deserve this."

"I'm so proud of you." Bloomfire licked his ear.

Bloodfur's heart swelled with pride. *I did it. I proved myself to the clan tonight! Surely every cat will trust me now?*

"So?" Flameheart prompted. "What's your first act as a warrior?"

Bloodfur let out a purr, his body aching with exhaustion. "Sleep!"

[image]

Allegiance Update #2

Shadowclan

Leader: Depthstar - Very dark blue-gray tom with a lighter front left paw, dark blue eyes.

Deputy: Cobratail - Mottled dark red and black tabby tom with amber eyes.

Medicine Cat: Dewstorm - Spotted gray tom with yellow eyes.

Warriors

Crowmask - Black tom with amber eyes.

Greenpine - Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Ashcloud - Dark gray and white tom with pale green eyes.

Cougarfoot - Golden brown tom with a white muzzle, black ear tips and tail tip, amber eyes.

Cliffshade - Dark brown and gray tom with a white underbelly, yellow eyes.

Flameheart - Ginger tabby tom with green eyes.

Copperstripe - Dark golden ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Timberstorm - Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Diamondrain - Silver gray she-cat with darker spots, paws, and ears, white chest, muzzle, and chin, light blue eyes.

Blackstorm - Black tom with yellow eyes.

Brownstripe - Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Foxshadow - Black and very dark ginger tom with a bushy tail, dark amber eyes.

Stripednose - Tortoiseshell tom with white paws, chest, and muzzle, black mark on his nose, blue eyes.

Apprentice, Mistypaw

Mottledface - Mottled brown tom with amber eyes.

Boost - Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. Former loner.

Song - White she-cat with light blue eyes. Former loner.

Apprentice, Coldpaw

Revengeheart- Battle scarred white tom with jet black legs, yellow eyes.

Swiftstalker- Black and white tom with blue eyes.

Bloodfur- Dark reddish brown tabby tom with a nick in his right ear, yellow eyes.

Apprentices

Mistypaw - Silver-gray she-cat with darker points, light blue eyes.

Coldpaw - Dark gray tom with darker points, dark blue eyes.

Queens

Rosebreeze - Creamy ginger tabby she-cat with pale amber eyes. Mother to Brownstripe's kits:

Creamkit - Brown and cream tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

Tinykit - Small brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes.

Honeykit - Golden-red and cream tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Poisonedsap - Dark golden brown she-cat with dark brown muzzle, throat, nose blaze, black chin, ears, paws, and tail tip, amber eyes. Mother to Cougarfoot's kits:

Spiderkit - Black and dark gray tom with dark amber eyes.

Amberkit- Orange and gold she-cat with amber eyes.

Falconkit- Dark ginger tabby tom with black tufted ears, amber eyes.

Bloomfire - Orange she-cat with white paws, muzzle, and chin, dark ginger ears. Mother to Flameheart's kits:

Cardinalkit - Reddish orange tabby tom with green eyes.

Heatkit - Dark ginger and white tom with yellow eyes.

Foxkit- Orange and white she-cat with black legs and ears, a fluffy white tipped tail, green eyes.

Applekit- Yellow tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Elders

Buzzardglare- Dark brown tabby tom with one blind eye, yellow eyes.

Foxshine - Ginger she-cat with yellow eyes.

Carrottail - Orange tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Bluerain - Light blue gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes.

Thunderclan

Leader: Strawberrystar - Speckled reddish-ginger and cream she-cat with amber eyes.

Deputy: Snowfalcon - Broad shouldered white tom with amber eyes.

Medicine Cat: Spicewhisker - Small black tom with a white muzzle, tail tip, and front right paw, yellow eyes.

Warriors

Broadwing - Broad shouldered dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Oaktuft - Brown and cream tabby tom with amber eyes.

Morningmist - Light gray tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Chillwhisker - Light gray tabby tom with light blue eyes.

Cedarnose - Dark brown tabby tom with a white splashed muzzle and paws, amber eyes.

Vanillafern - Creamy colored tabby she-cat with pale yellow eyes.

Battalon - Smoky black tom with gray-brown muzzle and underbelly, amber eyes.

Darkoak- Very dark brown tom with swirled black stripes, amber eyes.

Windclan

Leader: Gladestar - Light golden yellow tabby she-cat with pale greenish yellow eyes.

Deputy: Monarchwing - Orange she-cat with black spots and ear tips, golden yellow muzzle, chin, nose blaze, chest, and tail tip, darker orange paws, yellowish green eyes.

Medicine Cat: Silverberry - Silver she-cat with a darker front left

paw, tail tip, and right ear, green eyes.

Warriors

Firetail - Orange tom with a darker reddish tail and ears, amber eyes.

Jaggedear - Brown tabby tom with a torn left ear, green eyes.

Driftrunner - Dark golden brown tom with very thick black classic tabby stripes, muzzle, chin, ears, paws, chest, and underbelly, amber eyes.

Willowtail- Light gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

Whitehare - White tom with light green eyes.

Tornadowind - Dark gray tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Queens

Clovernose - Brown and white she-cat with green eyes.

Riverclan

Leader: Frostedstar - White tom with pale blue eyes.

Deputy: Ravenfeather - Black tom with amber eyes.

Medicine Cat: Otterpelt - Red-brown she-cat with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Sagepaw

Warriors

Frozenripple - Long furred silver tom with swirled white stripes, pale blue eyes.

Lemonsplash - White tom with yellow patches, yellow eyes.

Pebblestep - Mottled gray tom with white paws, pale green eyes.

Petalfin - Silver, black, dark gray, and white splashed she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentices

Sagepaw - Silver and black tabby she-cat with pale blue-green eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Skyclan

Leader: Ravenstar - Long furred black tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Sandblaze - Light golden yellow tom with light brown-ginger paws, mark on chest, ears, chin, and yellowish blaze on forehead and tail tip. Yellow eyes.

Medicine Cat: Ryeheart - Brown tabby tom with dark brown tabby legs, tail, ears, and nose blaze, creamy chin, muzzle, chest, and tail tip, amber eyes.

Warriors

Tigerleap - Dark golden brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Brackenleaf - Dark ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Chapter 15

[image]

Bloodfur padded into the camp carrying a thrush, his head held high. Two of his clanmates, Copperstripe and Ashcloud, flanked him. He had been a warrior for two moons now, and he had not lost the feeling of pride that seized him whenever he returned with prey for his clan. He remembered the excitement he'd felt when Cobratail had first assigned him to a patrol. He was finally a warrior. He could leave the camp whenever he wanted to hunt and patrol the borders.

He deposited his thrush onto the fresh kill pile, then paused, noticing Mistypaw and Coldpaw near the apprentices den practicing battle moves. He felt a pang of guilt. *Why did I tell them I didn't have time for them? I was so stupid!*

After a moment of hesitation, he called out to them. "Mistypaw, Coldpaw!" The two apprentices looked at him, showing no sign of friendliness. "Would you like this thrush?"

They exchanged a glance before Mistypaw spoke. "No thanks, Bloodfur." He saw her murmur something to Coldpaw, who shot Bloodfur a glare before they padded away toward Revengeheart and Swiftstalker.

Bloodfur's heart sunk. *Will they ever forgive me?* He had to give the thrush to some cat. He was going to go crazy if he didn't make someone happy today. He picked up the thrush and headed to the mouth of the medicine den. He saw Dewstorm organizing some leaves into piles with his new apprentice, Creampaw.

The clan was relieved that Dewstorm had recovered from the violent attack he'd suffered at highstones. As he recovered, he explained to the clan what had happened. He and Starfaith had been speaking together when they were attacked by three rogues. Depthstar pressed for information on their appearances, but

Dewstorm said it was too dark and everything had happened too fast for him to tell. He said he'd been trying to defend Starfaith when he was attacked by more rogues that arrived. Dewstorm hadn't seemed surprised when Depthstar explained that Starfaith had told him to go to highstones. Since that night, Dewstorm continued to claim that Starfaith was the reason he hadn't died there.

Half a moon ago, Brownstripe and Rosebreeze's kits had been apprenticed. While Dewstorm's wounds were healing, Creamkit had constantly been at the medicine cat's side, helping him with minor injuries and asking about herbs and remedies. A blind mouse could see that the kit wanted to be a medicine cat, and when it was time for her and her littermates to be apprenticed, Depthstar made sure her wish came true. Tinypaw had been apprenticed to Crowmask, and Honeypaw to Bloodfur's father, Flameheart.

"Now, what's this?" Dewstorm prompted, pushing a pile of blue flowers toward her.

Creampaw narrowed her eyes as she thought. "Borage?"

"Yes!" The gray spotted tom nodded approvingly. "And what's it used for?"

"Ummm I saw you give some to Bloomfire," She responded. "So it must do something for queens."

Dewstorm purred. "That's right, it helps them produce more milk for their kits." He paused, noticing Bloodfur standing outside of the den. "Bloodfur, how can I help you?"

He stepped into the den and dipped his head, dropping the thrush. "I thought you two could use some food."

Creampaw turned to him, her ears perking up. "Thank StarClan, I'm starving!" She exclaimed, crouching over the thrush and sinking her teeth into it. "Thanks, Bloodfur!"

"Yes, thank you," Dewstorm added. "You've done a lot for us lately." Since the attack at highstones, Depthstar had suggested that each

leader send a warrior with their medicine cat at the half moon meeting until they were sure the medicine cats would be safe traveling alone. Bloodfur had volunteered and went to highstones twice to escort Dewstorm.

"Anytime," Bloodfur purred, glad that he had managed to make some cat happy today. He turned away, deciding to go visit Bloomfire's kits. He couldn't believe how much they'd grown in just two moons. It felt like yesterday they were the size of mice. He ducked into the nursery and was met by the swarm of kits almost immediately.

"Bloodfur!" They squeaked and leaped at him, and he let out an amused purr as they pinned him and padded over his belly.

"Did you go hunting today?" Heatkit asked, his dark ginger tail waving eagerly. "What did you catch?"

Applekit bounced on his chest. "Show us a hunting crouch!"

"Please?" then Cardinalkit was standing alongside his head, green eyes shining.

Foxkit stretched out a black paw and tapped Bloodfur on the nose. "Show us, Bloodfur!"

They love me! Bloodfur thought with a purr. *It's so great to have more kin in the clan!* "Alright, alright," He chuckled.

"Yay!" Cardinalkit squeaked excitedly. "Show us, show us!'

"Kits!"

He saw Bloomfire laying in her nest at the back of the den, green eyes lit with warmth. "Bloodfur can't show you anything if you're clinging to him like fleas," She purred.

The kits quickly scrambled off of him, and Bloodfur got to his paws, shaking out his pelt. "Okay, but you have to come outside," He purred. "I don't think Poisonedsap and Greenpine will appreciate you leaping about the den like frogs on catmint."

"You've got that right," Poisonedsap grunted from where she lay, watching her kits playing. "These three drive me crazy enough as it is!"

"And I'll have my own to bother me soon enough," Greenpine added. She had just moved into the nursery two moons ago. She was expecting Cliffshade's kits. "I could use some fresh air though." She stretched out before padding out of the nursery.

Foxkit stared up at Bloodfur with bright green eyes. "Can we go, can we go?"

"Of course, come on." Bloodfur headed out of the den, and his four siblings bounded after him. Bloomfire followed and sat outside of the den, watching her kits warmly. He led them deeper into the clearing, them turned to them. "Alright," He meowed. "Show me a hunting crouch."

Cardinalkit frowned. "I thought you were going to show us?"

"I will," He assured the little red-orange tabby. "But first I want to see what you already know."

"Oh, okay." The tom-kit sat down, staring up at Bloodfur eagerly.

Bloodfur looked down at the kits, purring as they stared up at him with wide, eager eyes. *I mean a lot to them.* "Okay, show me your hunting crouches."

The four kits immediately dropped into crouches, none of which were a proper hunting crouch. Foxkit's tail was sticking straight up into the air like a reed, and Heatkit's legs were spread so far apart Bloodfur was sure he would fall onto his stomach. "Okay," Bloodfur resisted laughing at them. "Foxkit, lower your tail. Heatkit, you're hunting, not getting ready to hug a badger." He looked to the other two kits. "Applekit, your rump is far too high in the air. Cardinalkit, I don't even know what you're trying to do."

The kits looked disappointed and embarrassed. "Sorry, Bloodfur," Applekit mumbled.

Oh no, I hope I haven't hurt their feelings! Bloodfur leaned forward

and licked the yellow tabby between her ears. "You all did fine for a first try!" He promised. "You should have seen my first hunting crouch."

"It must have been really bad," Heatkit whispered to Foxkit, who giggled.

Bloodfur gently cuffed the tom over the ear. "Alright, let me show you a proper crouch." He dropped into a crouch. "See how I'm balancing my weight and keeping my tail just above the ground?" The kits tried to copy him. Cardinalkit and Foxkit seemed to be getting it, but Heatkit and Applekit were a bit off.

"That's good!" He praised. "Heatkit, lower yourself a bit closer to the ground. You too, Applekit." The kits obeyed, and Bloodfur nodded approvingly. "Good job, you'll be ahead of any other apprentice at this rate!"

"I was going to see them, but you seem to be doing the fathering for me."

Bloodfur turned to see Flameheart padding over, his green eyes gleaming with amusement. He guessed his father had just returned from a training session with Honeypaw. "Oh," He ducked his head in embarrassment, straightening. "Sorry."

"Don't be," Flameheart purred as the kits ran to meet their father. "Training with Honeypaw keeps me away from them. I'm glad they have you to be there for them."

"Flameheart, guess what?" Cardinalkit exclaimed, weaving around the ginger tabby's legs. "Bloodfur taught us the hunting crouch!"

Flameheart purred. "Did he?"

While the kits pestered Flameheart, Bloodfur heard Poisonedsap's kits playing inside the nursery.

"Ha! got you!"

He looked inside and saw Spiderkit and Amberkit play fighting, batting at each other's ears. Bloodfur purred. Poisonedsap's kits

were getting big, too. They'd be made apprentices in a few moons.

"Ow!" Amberkit yelped and jerked back, and Bloodfur saw crimson on her ear tip. For a heartbeat, he thought he imagined it. But as he watched, he realized that the kits weren't playing at all. They were fighting.

"Good job, Spiderkit," Poisonedsap purred. "Amberkit, you've got to be quicker! Go for his belly." The orange kit obediently leaped at her brother and pinned him, swiping her claws across his smoky belly fur, and he gasped out. Falconkit sat close to his mother, staring at his littermates wide eyed.

"What are you waiting for, Falconkit?" Poisonedsap demanded.

"I don't want to hurt them," The dark ginger tabby meowed.

Poisonedsap narrowed her eyes. "Do you want to be a warrior?"

Falconkit blinked. "Of course!"

"Then practice with your brother and sister," Poisonedsap growled. "Or I'll tell Depthstar not to make you a warrior."

Bloodfur gaped in shock. *She can't say that to a kit! And she certainly shouldn't be forcing them to fight like that!* He was immediately reminded of how roughly Poisonedsap had made Revengeheart and Swiftstalker play when they were kits. *This isn't right!*

As Falconkit lowered his head and approached his littermates, Bloodfur confronted the queen. "What do you think you're doing?" He asked, and the she-cat glared at him. "You can't make them fight like that. They're only kits!"

"Don't tell me how to raise my kits, Bloodfur," Poisonedsap growled softly. "You're not a father."

Bloodfur twitched his tail. "I don't need to be to know this is wrong."

The golden brown queen's eyes narrowed to slits. "You'd better mind your own business," She growled. "If you know what's best for

you?"

He bristled. *Is that a threat?*

"Bloodfur,"

Hearing that voice startled him. He turned and saw Swiftstalker outside the nursery, looking at him. "Come on," He meowed. "Let Poisonedsap do what she wants."

Bloodfur hesitated, glaring at Poisonedsap. The she-cat's amber eyes were fixed on him, her tail lashing. Her eyes gave nothing away. But Bloodfur knew she was angry. After a moment, he turned away and left the den.

He became face to face with Swiftstalker and hesitated, unsure of what to say. They hadn't spoken in so long. He met his old friend's gaze and saw that his emotions looked just as hidden as Poisonedsap's. "You must know what she's doing isn't right." Bloodfur lashed his tail. "You of all cats should know."

Swiftstalker looked away. "What I *know* is that you shouldn't cause trouble with Poisonedsap," He muttered.

"Why?" Bloodfur asked, unable to hide his irritation. *You don't speak to me for moons until now, and it's to defend your fox-hearted mother!*

The black and white tom's eyes narrowed. "Just stay away from her, Bloodfur. Okay?" With that, he turned away to join Revengeheart and Blackstorm by the fresh kill pile. Bloodfur stared after his old friend, feeling bitter with agitation.

"Bloodfur! Bloodfur!"

He turned to see Bloomfire's kits racing over to him, eyes shining.

"Will you show us something else tomorrow?" Cardinalkit asked hopefully.

Applekit waved her yellow striped tail. "Please, please!"

He let out a purr, deciding not to let Swiftstalker's words bother

him. *I did that before, and look how it effected my relationship with Mistypaw and Coldpaw.* "Of course I will," He promised. "I'll always be there for you."

"Really?" Cardinalkit stared up at him. "You promise?"

"I promise." Bloodfur nuzzled him. "I'm your brother."

The kits purred before racing away, and Bloodfur stared after them, his chest swelling with warmth. *I'll keep you safe. I won't let anything harm you, ever. But they won't stay in the nursery forever.* He remembered with a pang of sadness. *They'll have mentors, and they won't want to see me. I love spending time with them, and they look up to me!*

He looked across the clearing and saw Crowmask demonstrating a battle move for his apprentice, Tinypaw. As he watched, he remembered his training with Brownstripe, and how he'd seen Dewstorm telling Creampaw about herbs and their uses in the medicine den. *It must be great to have an apprentice.* Bloodfur thought. *To pass on everything you've learned, and teach them what it means to be a warrior...* A sudden thought struck him. *I wonder if Depthstar would let me mentor one of Bloomfire's kits?* He immediately headed to Depthstar's den.

The dark tom was sitting in his nest. He heard Bloodfur and twitched his ear, looking up. "Bloodfur, yes?"

He dipped his head and padded into the den. "Depthstar, I was wondering if I could possibly mentor one of Bloomfire's kits when the time comes for them to start training."

Depthstar hesitated, looking thoughtful. "You're a very young warrior. And you might go easy on an apprentice who is your kin. Mentor's need to be able to be tough on an apprentice if necessary."

"I can do that," Bloodfur assured him. "I'd train my apprentice as hard as any cat, I promise." The tom studied him for a long moment. Bloodfur's heart raced with hope. *Will he let me be a mentor?*

"Very well," Depthstar decided, and Bloodfur felt a rush of joy. "When Bloomfire's kits are six moons old, I promise you an apprentice."

Yes! I'm going to be a mentor! But to which one? Cardinalkit? Heatkit? Foxkit? Applekit? Oh, it doesn't matter, they're all great. "Thank you!" Bloodfur purred, dipping his head. "I won't disappoint you."

Depthstar tipped his head, and Bloodfur left the den, feeling overjoyed. *I'm going to be a mentor! This is-*

"Depthstar!"

He looked to the thorn tunnel and gasped. Cobratail was limping into camp, a clump of black for missing from his shoulder. Blood trickled from a cut above his eye. Behind him, Song followed, bearing similar scratches.

Depthstar rushed past Bloodfur to his deputy as cats gathered, anxiously murmuring. "What's happened?" The clan leader demanded. As he spoke, Stripednose padded into camp, carrying a limp cream tabby on his shoulders. Bloodfur froze. *Rosebreeze!*

"No!" Tinypaw, who had been training with Crowmask, raced across the clearing to her mother, her eyes round with alarm as Stripednose lowered the she-cat to the ground. Blood pulsed from her throat.

"We were attacked by rogues," Cobratail rasped. "A whole group, at least six, I would say. They attacked us, and Rosebreeze..." He trailed off and lowered his head.

"Rosebreeze!" Creampaw pelted out of the medicine den and stared down at her mother. "She's hurt!" She spun as Dewstorm followed. He looked at Rosebreeze for a moment, then turned to Cobratail. "Come on, I'll-"

"Dewstorm, what are you doing?" Creampaw wailed, pressing cobwebs to her mother's throat. "Rosebreeze is hurt badly! We have to save her!"

The tom looked at his apprentice solemnly. "I'm sorry, Creampaw."

He murmured, resting his tail around his apprentice's shoulders. "She's gone."

Creampaw stared at him as though she couldn't understand. "But we're medicine cats! We're supposed to save cats!"

"There's a lot that a medicine cat can do," Dewstorm murmured. "But we cannot change the path StarClan has laid out for us."

The cream and brown tabby ignored him, staring down at her mother and pawing her shoulder. "Get up..." She breathed.

"Creampaw. She's dead." Dewstorm meowed quietly. "She's safe in StarClan now."

She let out a wail and pushed her muzzle into Rosebreeze's fur.

Bloodfur's heart ached for her. *She's only been an apprentice for half a moon! She shouldn't have lost her mother so soon.* He watched as Brownstripe and Honeypaw joined Tinypaw and Creampaw, pressing their muzzles to the body.

Depthstar was quiet for a moment. "Cobratail, do you have any idea who did this?"

"I saw the rogues," Cobratail meowed quietly as Dewstorm dabbed cobwebs at his shoulder. "But I didn't recognize any of them."

"Song? Stripednose?" Depthstar turned his attention to the two young warriors. "What about you?"

They shook their heads, though Song's eyes flared with uncertainty. As the clan murmured quietly and went to Rosebreeze's body, Bloodfur saw two cats enter the camp. He looked to the thorn tunnel and saw Mottledface and Foxshadow slip into camp, casting swift glances around the clearing as though they didn't want any cat to see them. *What in StarcCan's name is going on?*

Chapter 16

[image]

A gentle breeze wafted through the camp as the sun peered over the horizon. Green-leaf was coming quickly, and it was clear that today would be one of the first warm days the clan would see. Many cats sat in the clearing, some speaking to each other quietly, others sharing fresh kill. Near the meeting rock, Cobratail was organizing the patrols for the day. The two elders, Buzzardglare and Bluerain, slept soundly in their den. Just over a moon ago, Carrottail and Foxshine had died.

Bloodfur sat at the edge of the clearing, his paws tingling with excitement. Two moons had past, and it was finally time for Bloomfire's kits to begin their training. He expected that Depthstar would call a meeting soon to apprentice the kits. He was eager to find out which of his siblings would be his apprentice.

Poisonedsap padded out of the warriors den and purred a greeting to Cougarfoot, who blinked warmly. She wove around her mate for a moment, brushing her ragged tail over his neck before continuing across the clearing to where Revengeheart and his friends sat.

Last moon, Poisonedsap's kits had been apprenticed, and she had returned to her warrior duties. Additionally, Mistypaw and Coldpaw had earned their warrior names; Mistybreeze and Coldpebble. Bloodfur had attempted to congratulate them, but they had ignored him. Mistybreeze seemed to never leave Revengeheart's side, but her brother stayed away from the group and focused more on hunting and patrolling. Judging by how often he saw them together, Bloodfur guessed Revengeheart and Mistybreeze would be

mates soon. *I don't know what she sees in a cat like him.* Bloodfur thought. *But I guess it's none of my business. Whatever makes her happy.*

He saw movement out of the corner of his eye and snapped his attention to Depthstar. The clan leader had emerged from his den. He paused to stretch out for a moment, then continued up the meeting rock. *It's time.* Bloodfur thought, his stomach turning with anticipation.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a clan meeting!"

The clan gathered, but Bloodfur noticed that Revengeheart and his friends remained where they were, casting cold looks at the clan leader. *That's rude.* He thought. *What do they have against Depthstar?*

Bloomfire's kits raced out of the nursery, their tails high in the air. Their eyes showed just how excited they were. "Oh, kits!" Bloomfire followed them more slowly. "I have to clean you up first!"

Flameheart joined his mate, purring. "They look fine."

Bloodfur watched as the four kits sat alongside each other, staring up at Depthstar eagerly.

"Cardinalkit, Heatkit, Foxkit, Applekit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed." Depthstar meowed. Foxkit let out an excited squeak. Beside her, Cardinalkit trembled with excitement, his tail waving back and forth.

"Foxkit, from this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Foxpaw. Your mentor will be Ashcloud."

Bloodfur watched as the orange and white she-cat padded forward to meet the gray and white warrior, touching noses with him. *So it won't be Foxpaw...*

Next, the clan leader turned his attention to Heatkit. Bloodfur grew hopeful. He admired the kit's eagerness and determination. Heatkit would make a good apprentice. But instead, Depthstar assigned Heatpaw to Cliffshade. He looked to the two remaining kits.

Cardinalkit was careful, but eager to learn. Applekit already showed a fair amount of self confidence and pride in her clan. Bloodfur couldn't hope for one over the other. Both kits would make excellent apprentices.

Depthstar looked to Cardinalkit, who stared up at his leader anxiously. "Cardinalkit, from this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Cardinalpaw." Bloodfur held his breath as he awaited Depthstar's next words.

"Bloodfur."

His heart skipped a beat as the leader said his name and fixed his blue eyes on him. "You are ready to take on an apprentice. You had received excellent training from Brownstripe, and you have shown yourself to be brave and loyal. I expect you to pass on all you know to Cardinalpaw."

The little red-orange tabby spun around, his tail shooting high into the air. "Bloodfur? You're going to be my mentor?" He exclaimed. He nodded and Cardinalpaw hurried forward to touch noses with his brother, green eyes shining. "I'm so lucky!" He purred. "I won't let you down!"

Bloodfur purred. "I know you won't. And I'll be the best mentor you could ask for." He promised.

"Is Depthstar crazy?"

He twitched an ear when he heard a murmur from the crowd behind him. He recognized Ashcloud's voice. "He should know better than to give Bloodfur an apprentice," The tom breathed. "Surely it's a bad idea?"

"Of course it is," Another cat whispered back. "Don't forget what Hawkfeather said about him."

Bloodfur's stomach churned with anxiety. *Things have been alright for a while! I thought after I helped save Dewstorm, the clan would think differently! I guess I was wrong... Whatever Hawkfeather said about me, these cats aren't going to let it go. I just wish I knew what it was...*

After Applepaw was apprenticed to Copperstripe, the clan chanted the apprentice's names as traditionally.

Bloodfur looked around and noticed many cats looking at him with cold, uncertain looks. He glanced to Revengeheart and Swiftstalker, who were sitting in the shadows with Mistybreeze and Mottledface. They were looking at him with similar expressions. After a moment, Revengeheart snorted and rose to his paws, nudging Mistybreeze, and she and the others followed him out of camp.

"Bloodfur!"

He turned to see Flameheart and Bloomfire approaching, eyes shining with pride. "I'm so happy Depthstar let you mentor one of them," Flameheart purred while Bloomfire nuzzled Cardinalpaw. "I know I can trust you more than any other warrior."

Bloodfur curled his dark red tabby tail. "I promise I'll train him well," he meowed happily. "He's in good paws."

"Of course he is," Bloomfire purred.

"Bloodfur, can we go out now?" Cardinalpaw bounced around him, staring at him hopefully. "I want to see the territory!"

"Of course!" Bloodfur purred and nudged him. "Come on, let's go."

Cardinalpaw's eyes lit with delight. "Yes!" He spun around and bounded toward the thorn tunnel. "Hurry up, Bloodfur!"

He hurried after his apprentice, startled at how fast he was. "I'm coming!"

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"Wow!" Cardinalpaw leaped around the rocks, staring up in awe at the pine branches stretching across the sky. "They're so tall," he breathed. "This is amazing!" He saw a frog leap by and squeaked, jumping back. "Look at that!"

Bloodfur purred as he watched his apprentice, recalling how he'd had the same reaction when Brownstripe had shown him the forest

for the first time. "And it's all ours." He meowed. "This land has belonged to ShadowClan for many generations." He wasn't sure if Cardinalpaw had heard him. The young tom was too busy looking around at every sound he heard in the trees and grass.

"Cardinalpaw," Bloodfur twitched his ear in amusement. "Come on. I'll start off by showing you the thunderpath."

Cardinalpaw turned to him, eyes wide. "What's that?"

"You'll find out soon enough." Bloodfur waved his tail as he padded forward. "Come on."

When they reached the thunderpath, Bloodfur was surprised to find more monsters traveling along it than usual. He paused where stones were lined the edge of the dark stone path. Cardinalpaw hung back in the grass, staring at it wide eyed.

"It's alright," Bloodfur called to him. "Come closer, or you won't be able to smell anything."

The tabby hung back, his green eyes round with fear. "I-I don't know... What if the monsters attack me?"

Bloodfur understood his apprentice's fear. He'd felt the same way when his mentor had shown him the thunderpath. But Brownstripe hadn't been as patient or sensitive with him. Bloodfur knew he would introduce Cardinalpaw to the thunderpath more gently. "They won't attack you," He promised. "They aren't attacking me, see? They like to stay on those paths."

Cardinalpaw hesitated before slinking forward, his eyes round as moons. He paused a few fox lengths from Bloodfur, looking afraid.

"Come on," Bloodfur coaxed. "You'll be fine, I promise." The apprentice stepped forward until he was at Bloodfur's side and brushed his pelt against his, looking around nervously. "Good." Bloodfur looked across the thunderpath. "See that forest over there?"

Cardinalpaw followed his gaze. "Y-yeah." He still sounded wary.

"That's ThunderClan territory," He explained. "You should be able to pick up their scent over the stench of the thunderpath." He paused. "Don't ever try to cross the thunderpath on your own. It can be dangerous."

"Have you ever crossed it?" Cardinalpaw asked curiously.

Bloodfur nodded. "When we attacked ThunderClan, I crossed it with the rest of the clan. And many moons ago I crossed it when Depthstar sent me to fetch Spicewhisker, ThunderClan's medicine cat."

"Oh, Bloomfire's told me that story!" The apprentice's ears perked up. "You saved Dewstorm's life!"

He let out an amused purr. "Well, it wasn't all me."

"But you were the only cat who could go to ThunderClan to ask for him." Cardinalpaw's bright green eyes shone with admiration. "Dewstorm would have died if it weren't for you. And you crossed the thunderpath all by yourself! And-"

A loud honking sounded from nearby, and Bloodfur nearly leaped out of his fur, turning to see a monster screeching toward them. It seemed to be out of control, it's body swinging at a slight angle. Cardinalpaw let out a wail of terror. Bloodfur grasped his scruff and shot back with the apprentice just as a huge black paw rolled by.

Great StarClan! Bloodfur trembled, letting go of Cardinalpaw and staring at the monster wide eyed as it swiveled a few times before continuing steadily along the path. *That's never happened before!* His heart pounded heavily in his chest. He looked aside where Cardinalpaw pressed against him, his red fur fluffed up and his eyes filled with even more terror than before.

Bloodfur drew in a shaky breath. *Cardinalpaw could have been killed!* "That doesn't happen a lot," He assured him, trying to sound calm and hide his own fear. "They usually stick to the thunderpath."

Cardinalpaw didn't respond, his tail as fluffy as a squirrel's. The fear scent coming off him seemed stronger than the reek of the

thunderpath. Bloodfur felt a rush of pity and wrapped his tail around him, leaning over him to lick him between the ears. "Don't worry, you're safe."

"W-what if a monster tries to attack me again?" He whimpered, green eyes wide with alarm.

"It won't," Bloodfur meowed. "I'll make sure it doesn't hit you."

Cardinalpaw fixed his terrified eyes on Bloodfur's. "What if you're not there?"

With a rush of compassion, Bloodfur rubbed his muzzle against his brother's. "I'll always be there," He promised. "I'll never let anything hurt you."

After a moment, Cardinalpaw started to relax, letting out a brief purr. "Can we go somewhere else?"

"Of course," Bloodfur purred and Cardinalpaw sighed in relief as they began heading away from the thunderpath.

***

The sun was setting by the time they returned to camp. Bloodfur padded alongside his apprentice as they neared the thorn tunnel. "So?" He prompted. "Did you have fun today?"

Cardinalpaw let out a purr. "Besides almost getting killed by a monster, it was great!" He paused, blinking warmly at his mentor. "I'm so happy you're my mentor, Bloodfur. You've always been there for me. I'm proud to be your brother, and I hope that one day I'll be half as great a warrior as you!"

Touched by his words, Bloodfur didn't know how to respond. *My siblings really look up to me. I'll make sure nothing changes that. They'll be incredible warriors, and I want to be there for them every pawstep of the way.* They entered the camp, and Cardinalpaw immediately raced over to his littermates, purring a greeting. They began exchanging information about their first day as apprentices.

"What do you mean, you don't want more kits?"

Bloodfur heard a snarl and looked across the clearing, startled to see Poisonedsap and Cougarfoot facing each other, tails lashing. Some cats watched with interest while others ignored, deciding to mind their own business and let the couple argue.

"I never planned on being a father in the first place," Cougarfoot reminded her sharply. "But you wouldn't leave me alone about it. We have three fine kits now. Isn't that enough?"

Poisonedsap's eyes flared with anger. "No, it's not!" She hissed. "A warrior's duty is to provide kits for the clan!"

Cougarfoot bristled. "I think there's a lot more than that! Anyway, you *just* left the nursery! Why do you want back in so soon?"

"We need to have another litter as soon as possible," The she-cat growled. "We're running out of time!"

The golden brown tom blinked. "I don't think you're that old-"

She let out an annoyed hiss. "I want more kits, Cougarfoot!" She spat. "And you'd better give them to me."

Bloodfur noticed Swiftstalker sitting near Revengeheart and Mottledface, looking nervous. *What's he worried about? Surely Poisonedsap won't attack her mate?*

Cougarfoot let out a frustrated snarl. "I'll think about it, okay?" He growled, shouldering past her. "Until then, I'm needed for a patrol." He paused, flashing a glare at his mate. "*That's* my duty to the clan, in case you've forgotten."

Poisonedsap glared at the tom coldly before whipping around, disappearing into the warriors den. Some of the cats murmured to each other before continuing what they were doing.

What's ruffling her fur? Bloodfur wondered. *Why is she pressuring Cougarfoot to have more kits? They just had three, and all Poisonedsap did was complain about them and make them fight!*

***

Two days later, Bloodfur padded out of the warriors den, pausing to lower himself to the ground and stretch out his front legs. The sun had risen and he had a full day of training planned with Cardinalpaw. *I'll show him how to hunt today.* He looked around for his apprentice. *Now where-*

"Good job, Applepaw!" He heard Revengeheart purr.

Bloodfur stiffened. Revengeheart was standing near the edge of the clearing with Applepaw and Cardinalpaw. The apprentices watched as the massive warrior demonstrated a battle move, swiping his claws into the air. "And you always go for the throat or belly," He added as he fell back on all fours. "That's a quick finisher."

Cardinalpaw frowned. "Isn't it against the warrior code to kill an enemy?"

Revengeheart narrowed his eyes. "Not if the enemy deserves it! Now dodge this!" He swiped a black paw at Cardinalpaw, and Bloodfur froze as he caught sight of his claws.

"Hey!" He shot across the clearing and shouldered Cardinalpaw away, glaring at the black-legged tom. "What do you think you're doing?"

Revengeheart blinked. "I'm showing them battle moves, Bloodfur. Keep your fur on." He returned his gaze to the apprentices. "So when you lash out-"

"Your claws were unsheathed," Bloodfur interrupted, glaring at the warrior. "You're going to hurt them."

The tom tilted his head. "They'll learn quicker if they get hurt," He growled. "What's the use of training with sheathed claws?" He stretched out a paw and pushed Bloodfur aside. "Cardinalpaw, attack your sister and-"

Bloodfur shouldered Revengeheart back, his tail lashing. "Don't tell him what to do!" He hissed. "Cardinalpaw is *my* apprentice, not *yours!"* His head pulsed with anger.

The white warrior twitched his ear and smirked. "That's a shame,"

He commented. "Cardinalpaw deserves a better mentor than you."

That's it! Bloodfur flattened his ears and let out a snarl, launching himself at Revengeheart. The warrior's amber eyes flashed with surprise before he was pinned. There were several gasps from within the camp, but Bloodfur barely noticed as he dug his claws into the tom's shoulders, more focused on his hatred for Revengeheart than anything else.

The white tom snarled and swiped his hind claws across Bloodfur's belly, and he shrieked before the larger warrior sank his teeth into Bloodfur's neck, twisting and pushing him onto his side. In a moment of terror, Bloodfur was certain that he was about to suffer the same fate as the Thunderclan warrior, Hickoryroot. He remembered Revengeheart raising his head after finishing off the warrior, his muzzle soaked in blood, and imagined himself in Hickoryroot's place.

"Revenge will guide you..." Bloodfur froze as a voice hissed in his ear, but he couldn't identify it, and there was no cat in the fight besides he and Revengeheart. With a snarl he ripped free from the warrior's grip, slashing his claws across his face. Revengeheart yowled before Bloodfur launched an attack, rolling across the clearing with him until they stopped with Bloodfur ontop, and he sank his teeth into Revengeheart's black front leg. The big tom yelped before Bloodfur sank his hind claws into his belly.

"What's he doing?" Some cat snarled.

"Stop at once!"

"Bloodfur!"

He ignored the voices and Revengeheart glared up at him, eyes flaring with hatred. "You shouldn't even call yourself a warrior, mouse-brain!" He spat. Anger pulsed through Bloodfur, and he raised his paw to strike Revengeheart again.

"Bloodfur!"

He jumped at the furious yowl and lowered his paw, glaring up.

Depthstar stared at him, blue eyes lit with bewilderment. "What's wrong with you?" The tom spat. "Get off him right now!" As Bloodfur backed off, Revengeheart snarled and leaped to his paws, crouching to leap at him.

"You too, Revengeheart!" Depthstar hissed, and the warrior reluctantly stopped, glaring at Bloodfur. "What are you thinking? Clanmates do *not* fight each other!"

Bloodfur panted, his fur bristling as he glared at Revengeheart. "He was showing the apprentices-"

"I don't care what he was doing!" The clan leader snarled, and Bloodfur lowered his head. He'd never heard Depthstar so angry. "It doesn't give you the right to draw blood from your clanmate!" He whipped his head to Revengeheart. "And *you* shouldn't provoke him!" The white tom twitched his ear, tail lashing. "You two are warriors now!" Depthstar hissed. "And you, Bloodfur, a mentor! What kind of example are you setting for your apprentice?"

Bloodfur looked at Cardinalpaw and felt a rush of guilt. His apprentice was staring at him wide eyed, stunned. He looked around and saw that the entire clan seemed to be watching the scene. Mottledface, Foxshadow, and Blackstorm looked either impressed or amused, while Swiftstalker and Mistybreeze looked stunned. Flameheart and Bloomfire stood near the warriors den, shock lighting their eyes.

Bloodfur lowered his head, shame burning through his pelt. *What was I thinking?* He could feel blood on his pelt, and saw that Revengeheart bore wounds too. "I'm sorry, Depthstar-"

"Sorry doesn't cut it," The tom snapped. "If you two are going to act like apprentices, I'll treat you like apprentices. Tomorrow you will spend the day caring for the elders."

Revengeheart's jaw dropped. "But-"

"Silence," Depthstar growled. "I'll have Swiftstalker train Cardinalpaw for the day. Go to the medicine den to have your wounds looked at. " He narrowed his eyes. "I never want to see

anything like this happen again. Understood?"

"Yes," Bloodfur rasped, and Revengeheart grunted agreement. With that, Depthstar turned away.

Bloodfur started heading for the medicine den, flinching as his clanmates stared at him.

"Look at the blood on his fur," Ashcloud breathed.

"Did you see how he was fighting?" Timberstorm gasped.

"Hawkfeather was right."

Bloodfur lashed his tail in frustration. *It's not my fault! Revengeheart provoked me.* As he neared the medicine den, he noticed Poisonedsap sitting nearby, watching him with interest. "You fought well, Bloodfur," The she-cat meowed. He glared at her for a moment before proceeding into the den.

Allegiance Update #3

Shadowclan

Leader: Depthstar - Very dark blue-gray tom with a lighter front left paw, dark blue eyes.

Deputy: Cobratail - Mottled dark red and black tabby tom with amber eyes.

Medicine Cat: Dewstorm - Spotted gray tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Creampaw

Warriors

Crowmask - Black tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Tinypaw

Ashcloud - Dark gray and white tom with pale green eyes.

Apprentice, Foxpaw

Cougarfoot - Golden brown tom with a white muzzle, black ear tips and tail tip, amber eyes.

Poisonedsap - Dark golden brown she-cat with dark brown muzzle, throat, nose blaze, black chin, ears, paws, and tail tip, amber eyes.

Cliffshade - Dark brown and gray tom with a white underbelly, yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Heatpaw

Flameheart - Ginger tabby tom with green eyes.

Apprentice, Honeypaw

Bloomfire - Orange she-cat with white paws, muzzle, and chin,

dark ginger ears.

Copperstripe - Dark golden ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Applepaw

Timberstorm - Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Diamondrain - Silver gray she-cat with darker spots, paws, and ears, white chest, muzzle, and chin, light blue eyes.

Blackstorm - Black tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Amberpaw

Brownstripe - Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Foxshadow - Black and very dark ginger tom with a bushy tail, dark amber eyes.

Stripednose - Tortoiseshell tom with white paws, chest, and muzzle, black mark on his nose, blue eyes.

Mottledface - Mottled brown tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Spiderpaw

Boost - Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. Former loner.

Song - White she-cat with light blue eyes. Former loner.

Revengeheart- Battle scarred white tom with jet black legs, yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Falconpaw

Swiftstalker- Black and white tom with blue eyes.

Bloodfur- Dark reddish brown tabby tom with a nick in his right ear, yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Cardinalpaw

Mistybreeze - Silver-gray she-cat with darker points, light blue eyes.

Coldpebble - Dark gray tom with darker points, dark blue eyes.

Apprentices

Creampaw - Brown and cream tabby she-cat with blue eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Tinypaw - Small brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes.

Honeypaw - Golden-red and cream tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Spiderpaw - Black and dark gray tom with dark amber eyes.

Amberpaw- Orange and gold she-cat with amber eyes.

Falconpaw- Dark ginger tabby tom with black tufted ears, amber eyes.

Cardinalpaw - Reddish orange tabby tom with green eyes.

Heatpaw - Dark ginger and white tom with yellow eyes.

Foxpaw - Orange and white she-cat with black legs and ears, a fluffy white tipped tail, green eyes.

Applepaw - Yellow tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Queens

Greenpine - Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes. Expecting Cliffshade's kits.

Elders

Buzzardglare- Dark brown tabby tom with one blind eye, yellow eyes.

Bluerain - Light blue gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes.

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Thunderclan

Leader: Strawberrystar - Speckled reddish-ginger and cream she-cat with amber eyes.

Deputy: Snowfalcon - Broad shouldered white tom with amber eyes.

Medicine Cat: Spicewhisker - Small black tom with a white muzzle, tail tip, and front right paw, yellow eyes.

Warriors

Broadwing - Broad shouldered dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Oaktuft - Brown and cream tabby tom with amber eyes.

Morningmist - Light gray tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Chillwhisker - Light gray tabby tom with light blue eyes.

Cedarnose - Dark brown tabby tom with a white splashed muzzle and paws, amber eyes.

Vanillafern - Creamy colored tabby she-cat with pale yellow eyes.

Battalon - Smoky black tom with gray-brown muzzle and underbelly, amber eyes.

Darkoak- Very dark brown tom with swirled black stripes, amber eyes.

Windclan

Leader: Gladestar - Light golden yellow tabby she-cat with pale greenish yellow eyes.

Deputy: Monarchwing - Orange she-cat with black spots and ear tips, golden yellow muzzle, chin, nose blaze, chest, and tail tip, darker orange paws, yellowish green eyes.

Medicine Cat: Silverberry - Silver she-cat with a darker front left paw, tail tip, and right ear, green eyes.

Warriors

Firetail - Orange tom with a darker reddish tail and ears, amber eyes.

Jaggedear - Brown tabby tom with a torn left ear, green eyes.

Driftrunner - Dark golden brown tom with very thick black classic tabby stripes, muzzle, chin, ears, paws, chest, and underbelly, amber eyes.

Willowtail- Light gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

Whitehare - White tom with light green eyes.

Tornadowind - Dark gray tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Queens

Clovernose - Brown and white she-cat with green eyes.

Riverclan

Leader: **Frostedstar -** White tom with pale blue eyes.

Deputy: Ravenfeather - Black tom with amber eyes.

Medicine Cat: Otterpelt - Red-brown she-cat with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Sagepaw

Warriors

Frozenripple - Long furred silver tom with swirled white stripes, pale blue eyes.

Lemonsplash - White tom with yellow patches, yellow eyes.

Pebblestep - Mottled gray tom with white paws, pale green eyes.

Petalfin - Silver, black, dark gray, and white splashed she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentices

Sagepaw - Silver and black tabby she-cat with pale blue-green eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Skyclan

Leader: Ravenstar - Long furred black tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Sandblaze - Light golden yellow tom with light brown-ginger paws, mark on chest, ears, chin, and yellowish blaze on forehead and tail tip. Yellow eyes.

Medicine Cat: Ryeheart - Brown tabby tom with dark brown tabby legs, tail, ears, and nose blaze, creamy chin, muzzle, chest, and tail tip, amber eyes.

Warriors

Tigerleap - Dark golden brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Brackenleaf - Dark ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Chapter 17

[image]

The late afternoon sunlight shone down onto the pine trees. Birds chirped excitedly within their branches. Green-leaf had arrived. Bloodfur sat at the edge of the forest, looking out into the distance. He'd been here for a while now. Since the fight with Revengeheart, his clanmates had been acting even more hostile around him. Some just gave him cold looks when he walked by, while others quickly moved elsewhere when they saw him. Bloodfur tried to ignore them as he'd always done in the past, but it was getting harder and harder. He wasn't sure how much more he could take. Even Dewstorm, whose life was saved thanks to Bloodfur's help, was acting uneasy around him. The medicine cat had always shown him kindness before. But now, Bloodfur was beginning to fear he would receive the same hostility from Dewstorm as he had from Hawkfeather.

Why did I let Revengeheart provoke me? Bloodfur's mind repeated the question he'd been reflecting on for the last two moons. *I should have just told Depthstar what he was doing. I shouldn't have attacked him. And in front of the entire clan...* He remembered the stunned looks on the faces of his parents and Cardinalpaw. *I let them down...* Even though they had understood the situation and forgave Bloodfur since, the shame continued to weigh him down.

He expected to have been confronted by Revengeheart after the fight, but to his surprise, the intimidating warrior hadn't interacted with him at all since. He supposed that was a good thing. He tried to keep his distance from Revengeheart to be sure that another bad situation could be avoided.

Bloodfur drew in a slow breath. *I should go back to camp.* He stayed still for a moment, then rose to his paws, turning and heading back the way he'd come through the trees. He needed to train Cardinalpaw. When he reached the camp, he saw Ashcloud and Cliffshade sitting near the thorn tunnel. When they saw Bloodfur,

they exchanged a glance and walked away.

I'll prove you're wrong about me. Bloodfur thought. *One day.* Pushing away the hurt and irritation he felt, he started scanning the clearing for his apprentice. Sure enough, he was sitting outside of the medicine den with Creampaw. The two young cats were meowing to each other, deep in conversation.

Bloodfur sighed and shook his head. Cardinalpaw was becoming an excellent hunter, but he spent so much time around the medicine den, Bloodfur feared that he truly wanted to be a medicine cat. He didn't want to hold Cardinalpaw back from pursuing his dreams. But thinking about losing his apprentice and brother hurt. And what would the clan think of him then? He tried to comfort himself in knowing that Dewstorm already had an apprentice. Cardinalpaw couldn't train as a medicine cat unless Creampaw changed her mind, and that was very unlikely. The young she-cat seemed destined to follow the path of a medicine cat.

With a flick of his tail, Bloodfur padded across the clearing toward the medicine den. "Cardinalpaw!" He called. The orange-red tabby quickly turned to Bloodfur, looking startled. "It's time to go out for a hunting session," Bloodfur meowed, pausing when he reached him. "Are you up to it?"

"Oh, yeah, sure Bloodfur," Cardinalpaw meowed, flashing Creampaw a quick look. "I have to go. See you, Creampaw." He hurried toward his mentor, and the cream and brown she-cat purred goodbye before turning to her den.

Bloodfur looked at his apprentice as they padded across the clearing toward the thorn tunnel. "You hang around the medicine den a lot. Are you sure you don't want to be a medicine cat instead?" He joked.

Cardinalpaw looked at him, confusion flashing in his green eyes. "What?" He blinked, then understood. "Oh, no. I want to be a warrior."

He tipped his head, wondering why Cardinalpaw had been confused. "Well-"

"Bloodfur!"

He paused, turning to see Cobratail standing by the meeting rock with Crowmask, Tinypaw, and Cougarfoot. "I'd like you and Cardinalpaw to join Crowmask's patrol," The deputy meowed.

Bloodfur hesitated. "I was about to take Cardinalpaw for a hunting lesson."

"The patrol will be hunting anyway," Cobratail said. "Besides, it'll be good for the apprentices to practice together." Bloodfur dipped his head, and he and Cardinalpaw headed toward the other cats. While his apprentice spoke to Tinypaw, Crowmask and Cougarfoot exchanged a look. *They don't want me on the patrol.* He thought.

"Let's go," Crowmask flicked his tail and led the cats out of camp.

***

"Look, Bloodfur!" Cardinalpaw raised his head proudly, a plump frog in his mouth.

Bloodfur nodded, pleased that his apprentice had the biggest catch so far. They'd been hunting all afternoon and the sun was setting. "Well done!" He looked at the other cats. Crowmask looked impressed.

"Wow! Great job, Cardinalpaw!" Tinypaw exclaimed, racing to his side. "I wish I could hunt like that!"

Cardinalpaw purred and buried his frog. "Thanks! I can show you if you want." He ran into the marsh, and Tinypaw followed.

Cougarfoot stepped to Bloodfur's side, and he glanced at the compact warrior uncertainly. "You've trained him well," The golden tom nodded approvingly.

He was startled at the warrior's comment. Considering he was mates with the rudest she-cat in the forest, Bloodfur assumed Cougarfoot would be just as bitter. But he wasn't so bad. "Thank you," He hesitated. "I hear Poisonedsap is expecting more kits. Congratulations."

"Mmm." Cougarfoot twitched a tufted ear and turned away.

I don't think he wanted more kits. Bloodfur thought. *Poisonedsap must have talked him into it somehow.*

A horrified shriek rang out from beyond the marsh, and all three warriors froze. *Something's wrong!*

"Tinypaw!" Crowmask immediately ran for the marsh, and Bloodfur and Cougarfoot pelted after the black warrior. When they reached them, Cardinalpaw was standing frozen with his paws soaked in the mud. A few fox lengths away, Tinypaw was crouched over a motionless tabby who lay half in the mud.

"Brownstripe!" The apprentice wailed and grasped her father's scruff, dragging him onto dry land. His fur was soaked in a disgusting mixture of mud and crimson. A ragged wound split his throat, and his yellow eyes were wide and sightless.

As Cougarfoot ran to Tinypaw's side, Bloodfur noticed another shape not far from Brownstripe's body. *Oh no..!* He ran past the others and crouched, pressing his nose to the silver she-cat's fur. Blood pooled from her belly. "Diamondrain..." He rasped.

"Diamondrain?" Crowmask shot over and shouldered Bloodfur aside, staring down at his mate numbly. "No..."

Bloodfur didn't know what to do, feeling frozen with shock. *Brownstripe and Diamondrain are dead..!* He stared at the body of his former mentor. *We were never close... But you didn't deserve this!* His heart ached as he watched Tinypaw cuddle against Brownstripe. *She just lost Rosebreeze a few moons ago, and now she's lost her father too!*

A cat brushed against him and he jumped a little, turning to see Cardinalpaw at his side. "Who would do this?" His apprentice whimpered.

"I don't know," Bloodfur rasped, resting his tail over him. "But they're in StarClan now."

Cougarfoot hung back from the others. "We need to take their bodies back to camp," He meowed quietly. He hesitantly stepped

closer, gently nudging Tinypaw with his muzzle. "I'll take him." As Cougarfoot pulled Brownstripe onto his broad shoulders, Crowmask slowly pulled his mate up, but had difficulty getting her onto his shoulders. Bloodfur started forward to help, but the tom gave him a warning growl, and Bloodfur stepped back respectfully.

"Let's go," Cougarfoot murmured, and while he and Crowmask led the way, Bloodfur followed with Tinypaw and Cardinalpaw flanking him. The tabby she-cat stared at her paws as she walked, her tail drooping.

He felt horrible for the young apprentice who had lost both her parents at such a young age. *Thank StarClan my parents are both alive...* Bloodfur thought. "I'm so sorry, Tinypaw," He murmured.

She didn't respond for a moment. "Who would do this?" She croaked. "And why? Brownstripe and Rosebreeze never hurt anyone! They promised to be there for us." She lowered her head. "Now they won't even see us be made warriors."

Bloodfur's heart broke. He rested his tail around her, and Cardinalpaw pressed against him, clearly shaken at what he'd seen. He found himself comforting both apprentices as they headed to camp.

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It was dark when they returned to camp. As the cats arrived, they were greeted by cries of shock and grief. Bloodfur sat with Cardinalpaw and Tinypaw while Crowmask and Cougarfoot carried the bodies to the center of the clearing. Cats began settling around them, some hanging their heads in grief, while others asked questions.

"What happened?"

"Not more rogues!"

Depthstar leaped down from the highrock, slowly approaching the bodies. "Brownstripe..." He murmured and crouched, rasping his tongue over his son's head. "I hoped that Snakekit would be my only

son not to outlive me..." As he spoke, Blackstorm sat beside his father, staring down at Brownstripe solemnly.

A moment later, Creampaw and Honeypaw ran over to Brownstripe, letting out wails of grief. Tinypaw broke away from Bloodfur and hurried to her littermates side. The three she-cats huddled together against their father's body, whimpering.

Bloodfur blinked as Cardinalpaw left his side to join them. *He wasn't close with Brownstripe. Surely he should leave his family to grieve?* His apprentice crouched beside Creampaw and rested his chin on her head. The medicine cat pressed against him and curled her tail over his back.

He saw Mistybreeze and Coldpebble race to their mother's side. Crowmask stepped back to allow his kits to grieve. "Oh, no!" Mistybreeze wailed, pressing her muzzle to Diamondrain's fur. "Who did this?" Her brother hung his head, ears flattened.

Bloodfur stared at the two cats sadly. He longed to go and comfort them as Cardinalpaw had for Creampaw. But he doubted Mistybreeze and Coldpebble wanted him anywhere near them.

"This is crazy," Ashcloud murmured not far from Bloodfur. "We're losing so many warriors!"

"Who could be attacking us like this?" Bloomfire breathed. "And why?" As she spoke, Depthstar turned away from his son's body, leaping onto the meeting rock and yowling for the clan to gather. Bloodfur padded closer to the rock and sat down, looking up at his leader solemnly.

"What's going on?" A kit squeaked from the nursery.

"Nothing, Ebonykit," Greenpine meowed hesitantly from inside the den. "Come back and play with Flintkit." Bloodfur could understand why she didn't want her kits to see the bodies. They were only a moon old, and they didn't need to be exposed to such things.

"I've dismissed this issue for long enough," Depthstar meowed from where he stood atop the rock. "Since last season, we've suffered

many rogue attacks. Maplefur, Milkblaze, Rosebreeze, Hawkfeather were lost." He drew in a breath. "And now Brownstripe and Diamondrain." He looked down at Mistybreeze and Coldpebble as they huddled against their mother's body. "Not only that, but Starfaith of WindClan was killed, and we nearly lost Dewstorm. Enough is enough. I can no longer dismiss the fact that the clans are under attack."

"Something has to be done before more cats die," Cobratail added. "This is a serious issue. I suggest we take it to the next gathering."

"Yes." Depthstar nodded agreement.

Copperstripe rose to his paws. "But who would do this?" He urged. "Deserve?"

The clan deputy twitched his ear. "We've no reason to fear Deserve. He was a kit and we haven't seen him for seasons."

"Besides, this is clearly the work of more than one cat," Foxshadow lashed his bushy tail. "A large group, it seems."

"But what rogues do we have problems with?" Depthstar demanded. "I can't think of any." The clan murmured anxiously below. Bloodfur looked around anxiously. *We have to do something soon! Perhaps there was some scent left on the bodies that would give some clue?* He was about to suggest this when a cat spoke.

"Depthstar." Poisonedsap slowly rose to her paws, raising her gaze to the tom. "It brings me great grief to suggest this, but... Have you thought of looking to your own cats?"

The dark furred tom bristled. "Which ShadowClan warrior would do such a thing?"

Bloodfur drew in a breath. *Revengeheart and his friends sneak out of camp so often... Could they be responsible for this?* He thought it was possible that the she-cat had noticed this behaviour too. But was she really about to accuse her own son of murder?

The golden brown she-cat swished her ragged tail over the ground. "Who do you think, Depthstar?" She murmured. "Which cat has

always been an outcast? Which cat was absent from camp before the bodies were found?" She paused, raking her amber gaze across the clan. "Which cat did Hawkfeather warn us about?" She rested her gaze on Bloodfur.

Bloodfur's heart skipped a beat, his fur bristling in shock as one by one, every cat fixed their eyes on him. *Wait, they think-*

"Bloodfur never liked his mentor!" Poisonedsap hissed as the clan started to speak to each other anxiously, shooting glares at him. "And it's clear he dislikes Revengeheart! I'll bet he killed Diamondrain just to hurt his mate, Mistybreeze!"

"I-" Bloodfur choked out a gasp.

Mottledface leaped to his paws. "I saw Bloodfur leap out at Hawkfeather when he was an apprentice! And that was just a day before he was killed!"

"That's not true!" Bloomfire exclaimed, fury lighting her eyes. "He would never kill any cat!"

"Prove it!" Blackstorm spat.

The clearing grew louder and louder with yowls and cats arguing. Bloodfur could barely think in all the commotion. He looked to Depthstar desperately, but the clan leader was staring at him, not saying a word. *Great StarClan, he's considering this!* "I never killed anyone!" He yowled, glaring at Poisonedsap. "How dare you-"

"Murderer!" Ashcloud screeched.

"We should have known!"

Bloodfur found the space between he and his clanmates growing smaller and smaller as they closed in on him. His head spun, overwhelmed at their fury and accusations.

"Enough!" Dewstorm yowled from outside his den, yellow eyes lit with alarm. "There's no-"

"Did you do this?" Mistybreeze stared at Bloodfur, her blue eyes

wide with distress. "Did you kill my mother?"

"No, I-" Bloodfur froze as Crowmask pushed his way through the crowd, snarling and arching his back.

"How dare you!" The black warrior screeched and Bloodfur shrunk back, his eyes wide and his heart sprinting with terror. Crowmask started toward him, and he backed up only to bump into Cliffshade.

"You piece of fox dung!" The brown and gray warrior hissed.

[image]

"I didn't do anything!" Bloodfur shrieked, his fur fluffed up in panic as Crowmask crouched to lunge at him. *He's going to kill me! They're going to kill me!* His eyes darted across the clearing, desperate for help. He spotted Swiftstalker sitting at the edge of the clearing. Bloodfur stared at his old friend desperately, but the black and white warrior dropped his gaze.

"Leave him alone!" He heard Cardinalpaw wail.

"He's not a murderer!" Foxpaw cried.

Crowmask was about to launch his attack when a ginger blur flashed in front of him. "What's wrong with you?" Flameheart snarled at the tom, and Bloodfur crouched behind his father, feeling as vulnerable as a kit. *The whole clan wants me dead! They're going to kill me!*

"Get out of my way, Flameheart!" Crowmask spat. "That cat is a murderer!"

Flameheart's ears were flat against his head, eyes blazing with defiance. "No, he isn't!" He hissed. "You won't lay a claw on him!"

"All of you, stop!" Cobratail snarled, but no cat seemed to hear the deputy, or if they did, they didn't care. Every cat was snarling insults at Bloodfur, looking ready to attack.

"Hawkfeather warned us about him!" Poisonedsap raised her sinister voice above the rest. "The kit born in blood couldn't have been

anything but a bad omen!"

Born in blood!? Bloodfur's mind spun. *What is she-*

"Move!" Crowmask snarled at Flameheart. "Let me do what should have been done a long time ago!"

The ginger tabby shouldered him aside, baring his teeth. "My son is innocent!"

"Stop that nonsense, Flameheart!" Poisonedsap spat. "He's not your son! You were a fool to take in that kit! He was a sign of trouble since the start!"

What? Bloodfur froze and shakily stood, staring at Flameheart. "What's she talking about?" Flameheart looked back at him, his green eyes lighting with stress.

"Enough!" Depthstar screeched, and the cats slowly fell silent. "This is madness! There's no evidence that Bloodfur killed those cats."

Crowmask lashed his tail. "Everything Poisonedsap said makes perfect sense to me!"

"He's a murderer and he'll destroy our clan!" Ashcloud snarled. "We should have listened to Hawkfeather."

"Silence!" The clan leader snarled. "Bloodfur is innocent until proven guilty! No cat will harm him. Is that understood?"

Some of the cats agreed, while others were still glaring at Bloodfur furiously. *I didn't do it!* He silently yowled, but he was terrified some cat would claw his throat out if he spoke. As the cats slowly backed off, Flameheart turned to face him.

"Bloodfur!" Bloomfire rushed over and pressed against him, but Bloodfur ignored her, staring at his father. "What was Poisonedsap talking about?" He rasped. "I'm your son... Aren't I?" He dared to ask. "And what did she mean, I was born in blood?"

Flameheart didn't speak, but his eyes were filled with the emotions of a father who was about to lose everything.

"Of course you are," Bloomfire whispered, but Flameheart shook his head.

"He was going to find out sooner or later." The ginger tabby murmured, and Bloodfur stared at him, numb with disbelief. *No! I am your son! I have to be!* Flameheart turned away. "Come, Bloodfur."

Bloodfur slowly padded after him, and Bloomfire started to follow. Flameheart turned to his mate. "I'll tell him alone," He meowed quietly, and Bloomfire hesitantly agreed, sitting down.

***

Stars shone in the night sky as Bloodfur followed Flameheart into the forest. His heart pounded heavily at his chest. He was still shaken at how the clan had turned on him. Their accusations and insults still echoed in his mind. "*Murderer!" "Piece of fox dung!" "Did you kill my mother?"*

" He's not your son! "

They reached a clearing, and Flameheart turned to face Bloodfur, sitting down. Bloodfur stared at the tabby warrior, his tail swishing nervously. He had a horrible feeling that his entire life was about to change. Whatever Flameheart had to say, it wasn't going to be good. "Flameheart," He choked out. "Tell me it's not true."

The warrior lifted his gaze to Bloodfur, sadness glistening in his eyes. "I'm so sorry," He murmured. "It's true... I'm not your father."

His stomach twisted as a wave of grief hit him. "Then who is?" He rasped. "Did Bloomfire have another mate who d-"

"Bloomfire isn't your mother." Flameheart hung his head.

"What?" Bloodfur's heart skipped a beat. He hadn't been prepared to lose both parents. "That can't be!" His mind whirled. "If you and Bloomfire aren't my parents, then who are?"

Flameheart drew in a deep breath. "Bloomfire had a brother," He meowed quietly. "His name was Rainheart. He was a great and loyal

warrior. His mate was Poppywing. She was the most beautiful, gentle cat you could meet." He hesitated. "When Poppywing was kitting, there... there was an accident. She bled to death." Each word was piercing Bloodfur's heart like thorns. But he kept listening.

"Rainheart was devastated." Flameheart went on. "He didn't want to live without Poppywing. He ran out of the camp, and no cat knew where he went. Bloomfire and Dewstorm were still in the nursery with Poppywing's body, and they found that a kit had made it out." He looked at Bloodfur solemnly. "You. You were covered in blood. Hawkfeather believed it was a bad omen."

"And Rainheart?" Bloodfur murmured. "What happened to him?"

After a long moment, Flameheart spoke again. "Bloomfire left the camp to tell Rainheart you had survived. But..."

Bloodfur swallowed. "But what?"

"He... He didn't care." Flameheart dropped his gaze. "He just wanted to be with Poppywing in StarClan. He asked Bloomfire to call you Bloodkit before he ran into a fox den." As Bloodfur gasped, the tom continued. "Me and Bloomfire were already mates, and we planned to have kits. We decided to take you in as our own." He paused. "And... that's it."

Bloodfur stared at the ground, his mind spinning at everything Flameheart had told him. *My parents are Rainheart and Poppywing. My father didn't want me. Flameheart and Bloomfire...* He raised his head, trembling as he met his father- no, the cat he'd thought was his father-'s gaze. "You lied to me..." He whispered.

Flameheart stared at him numbly. "I'm sorry," He meowed quietly. "We thought it was for the best-"

"What?" Bloodfur leaped to his paws, his sadness overridden by anger. "That I live my life through a lie? Not know the names of my own parents?"

"Bloodfur-"

He ignored the warrior and turned away, his tail lashing. "I can't believe it!" He hissed. "You lied to me! You and Bloomfire lied to me!" He turned to face Flameheart. "I trusted you! I looked up to you!"

"We didn't want you to feel abandoned!" Flameheart meowed, his green eyes filled with distress.

"So you'd rather I feel betrayed?" Bloodfur retorted and paced the clearing, anger pulsing through him. "I can't believe the whole clan has held this against me! All my life, I've been treated differently just because of the way I was born." He glared at Flameheart. "And you and Bloomfire just made it worse by lying to me! If I knew-"

"Bloodfur, we did what we thought was best for you!" Flameheart snapped. "Bloomfire wanted to have kits, but we put it off for you." His tone softened. "We raised you as our own, and not a moment has gone by where I haven't been proud to call you my son. We've loved and cared for you-"

Bloodfur whipped around to face him. "It doesn't matter!" He hissed, unable to contain his anger. "You lied to me, and I'll never forgive you!"

Pain lit Flameheart's eyes. He started toward him, moving his tail to rest it around him. "Bloodfur-"

"I never want to speak to you or Bloomfire ever again!" Bloodfur yowled into the night. "You're not my father, and I'd be ashamed if you were!" He saw the hurt in the tom's eyes only for a moment before Bloodfur spun and ran off into the night.

His paws drummed against the cold forest floor as he ran. He didn't know where he was going. But he knew he wanted to be as far away from Flameheart, from the clan, as possible. The cold night air streaked past him as he raced through the trees, his mind spinning. *They lied to me! They all lied to me!*

When he reached the edge of the forest, he stopped, panting and drinking in the cold air as he caught his breath. He was trembling. After a moment, his anger faded, and it was replaced by a wave of

heart-ache that overcame him like a wave, drowning him in grief. He raised his head to the stars, letting out a small cry.

Are Rainheart and Poppywing up there? He wondered miserably. *Have they been watching me suffer all this time too?* He hung his head. He felt dead inside. Everything he'd ever known was a lie. *Bloomfire isn't even my mother!* With a rush of emotional pain, he realized that Cardinalpaw, Foxpaw, Heatpaw, and Applepaw weren't his siblings. He let out a cry. *I was so proud to be their brother!* He squeezed his eyes shut. *Oh, Starclan, let this all be a horrible dream!* He hung his head, overwhelmed with misery.

He heard the bushes rustle behind him, but he didn't move. "I don't want to see you, Flameheart!" He growled.

"Flameheart went back to camp."

He bristled, casting a swift glance over his shoulder as Revengeheart stepped out from the bushes, his white fur almost glowing in the darkness. His amber eyes were fixed on him. Bloodfur looked away, his heart throbbing. *Of all the times for him to show up!* "I don't want to talk to you," He growled.

Revengeheart studied him for a moment before padding over. "I saw everything," He meowed as he sat beside him, and Bloodfur cast him a glare. "I had no idea. I'm sorry they lied to you. And how the clan acted earlier..." He shook his head. "I can't imagine how scared you were."

He narrowed his eyes at the warrior. "No, you can't," He growled. "You've never cared for any cat. You've killed before."

The tom looked at his paws. "I stand by the fact that a ThunderClan warrior killed my father," He meowed. "I have no shame in avenging his death." He paused. "But you... You have suffered something greater than all of us. All the whispers behind your back... The way they look at you... The way they've treated you all your life... It's so unfair. I can't imagine the pain you feel."

Bloodfur looked at Revengeheart, surprised to see sympathy in his usually menacing eyes. "You've always been cast aside, Bloodfur.

Treated like you're a bad case of green-cough." He frowned. "Why do you put up with it?"

"What can I do?" Bloodfur blinked, suddenly curious about what the tom had to say. Revengeheart hadn't known about the secret. So maybe he could trust him.

Revengeheart's eyes glinted in the dark. "You can stand up for yourself. Make them sorry they ever hurt you. Set out for revenge." He flexed his claws. "Stir up some trouble."

Bloodfur stared at him. "What? I can't do that to my clanmates."

"Your clanmates?" Revengeheart echoed. "You mean those cats who were ready to tear out your throat just now? They don't deserve your loyalty. Look at how they treat you. They think you're a murderer!"

"I can prove them wrong," Bloodfur protested.

"No!" Revengeheart stared at him. "Don't you see, Bloodfur? You shouldn't *have* to prove them wrong. You shouldn't have to prove *anything* to those fox-hearts!" As Bloodfur hung his head, the black legged warrior shifted closer to him. "Me and my friends have seen you," He meowed quietly. *"We* know you're no murderer. Stand with us, and we'll help you get revenge on every cat who has ever wronged you."

Bloodfur shut his eyes. *This isn't right... Getting back at my clanmates isn't the way to fix this...* As he thought, memories flashed through his mind. *The looks they've always given me, even as a kit. The harsh presumptions..."It could be a mistake to train him." Ashcloud, Cliffshade, Copperstripe... "No, he's bad news. I've known from the day he was born." Poisonedsap turning her fierce gaze on me, accusing me of pushing Swiftkit into the thorns."You stay away from my son! You're nothing but trouble to this clan!" The way Brownstripe tried to scare me on my first day as an apprentice... "Remember. No matter who they are... or how young they are... warriors will tear apart any enemy. Do you understand?" My mentor wanted me dead... "Bloodpaw will be slaughtered in the battle if you don't start training him properly!" "Maybe that wouldn't be a bad thing." Batpaw taunting me in the battle... "I bet*

you think you're so dangerous with a name like that! But I know you're not!"

"Come on, Bloodfur..." Revengeheart murmured. "Let us help you."

More and more horrible memories flooded over him until he couldn't take it anymore. Bloodfur opened his eyes and looked at the sky, a cold breeze ruffling his pelt. But he didn't shiver. In fact... It felt good. Maybe even great. The pain in his heart was gone. Now, there was nothing left but a desire for revenge. "You're right," He growled. "These cats have done nothing but cause me pain. Flameheart, Bloomfire... All of them..." He dug his claws into the ground. "They've run out of chances. I've suffered long enough." He looked at Revengeheart, lashing his tail. His yellow eyes glowed in the darkness."Tell me how to make them pay, my friend."

Chapter 18

[image]

A cool breeze ran along Bloodfur's pelt, awakening him. He slowly blinked open his yellow eyes, confused for a moment as he took in his surroundings. *This isn't the warriors den...* He was curled up against the half-exposed roots of a large pine tree. He felt damp leaves and pine needles beneath him. After a heartbeat, it all came back to him. *The clan's accusations... Flameheart and Bloomfire's secret... I'm not their son. They lied to me.* Bloodfur closed his eyes, feeling grief weighing at his heart. But the feeling only lasted for a moment before anger replaced it. He slowly rose to his paws and grunted as he stretched out, his tail in the air and his muzzle close to the ground. *They'll pay for this.* He thought, digging his claws into the earth. *I'll make sure they do.*

"Bloodfur."

He jumped a little and turned to see Revengeheart step out of the bushes, amber eyes fixed on him. "You never returned to camp?" He sounded surprised.

After the two cats had spoken last night, Revengeheart had gone back to the camp. Bloodfur had told him he'd catch up in a little while. But the more he'd thought about it, the more he realized that he didn't want to go back. He didn't want to face his clanmates glares. He didn't want to even *look* at Flameheart and Bloomfire. So he'd decided to spend the night here in the forest. For all he knew, some cat like Crowmask would try to kill him while he was asleep.

"I didn't want to go back there," Bloodfur muttered.

The scarred tom nodded, sympathy flickering in his eyes. "Come on. I'm going to meet with the others." He flicked his tail before turning away. "Join us."

Bloodfur hesitated before following. It was quiet for a while as the two cats headed through the forest. He looked at Revengeheart.

"You didn't know, did you?" He asked.

"About your parents?" The tom asked, not meeting Bloodfur's gaze. "No. But my mother told me about Hawkfeather's omen when I was a kit."

Bloodfur bristled. "And you never told me?" *Great, I can't trust him either!*

The tom shot him a look. "Keep your fur on," He growled. "I saw no point in telling any cat. Omens are a load of fox dung! There is no *StarClan*. That fluff brained medicine cat just wanted to stir up trouble! Good thing he's dead."

Bloodfur was unsure. *Do I believe in StarClan? I've had dreams of that she-cat telling me the prophecy... And I saw Starfaith at the moonstone... But perhaps it was just dreams and my mind playing tricks.* " So you don't think I'll destroy ShadowClan?"

"Of course not!" Revengeheart snorted, almost sounding amused. "No cat is *destined* to do anything!"

They continued walking in silence. Bloodfur looked down as he walked. He imagined his claws sinking into every cat who had ever wronged him. *Crowmask... Flameheart... Bloomfire... Depthstar! The clan leader even sat there doing nothing while the clan was ready to rip my throat out!* "I can't believe it!" He blurted out in a snarl, unable to hold in his thoughts any longer. "I can't believe every cat in this clan lied to me! And they treated me differently my whole life, just because of Hawkfeather! The stupid furball! If he were still alive, I would rip his-"

Revengeheart rested his tail over Bloodfur's shoulders, startling him. "Take it easy." He meowed as Bloodfur glared at him, his fur slowly flattening. Revengeheart almost looked pleased at his anger. "All of ShadowClan is going to pay, my friend. You just need patience. Since the clans have disrespected you, you're going to disrespect them."

Bloodfur twitched his ear. *What does he mean?* They neared a clearing where several cats sat waiting. Blackstorm and Mottledface

were speaking quietly to each other. Foxshadow was sitting in the shade of a pine tree, his fluffy tail twitching as he grumbled to them. Mistybreeze and Swiftstalker were the only cats who were silent. As he and Revengeheart arrived, the cats turned their attention to them.

"About time!" Blackstorm exclaimed. He noticed Bloodfur and narrowed his eyes. "What's *he* doing here?"

"Bloodfur has decided to join us," Revengeheart announced as the cats looked at him. Swiftstalker's blue eyes flashed with surprise, but he said nothing. Across from him, Mistybreeze glanced at Bloodfur briefly before looking away.

Mottledface's eyes gleamed. "You've made the right choice." Beside him, Blackstorm nodded.

Bloodfur narrowed his eyes, raking his gaze across the cats. "Do any of you believe I'm a murderer?" He demanded. He didn't want to be near any cat who did.

"Of course not." Swiftstalker spoke first, to his surprise. "You'd never harm anyone." The other cats agreed, all but Mistybreeze, who wouldn't even look at Bloodfur.

"Right." Foxshadow's eyes gleamed. "Let's ask Cobratail if we can go on a patrol." He said this in such a sly way, it troubled Bloodfur. But he didn't question the black and ginger tom as they headed back to camp.

Bloodfur's stomach twisted as they neared the thorn tunnel. He didn't know what kind of greeting he would receive. And he hoped Flameheart and Bloomfire were still asleep. They entered the camp, and Bloodfur stayed close to his companions, flicking his gaze around nervously. Several cats were looking at him already.

"It's him," Copperstripe growled.

"I thought he'd left." Ashcloud commented.

Suddenly, Crowmask stepped in his path, glaring at him. "Leave," He growled. "You're not welcome here."

Bloodfur narrowed his eyes. "Excuse me?" He growled.

"ShadowClan has no room for murderers!" Cliffshade joined the black tom, baring his teeth. "Especially when I have kits in the nursery."

He bristled, anger surging through him. "You think I'd harm kits?" He snarled.

"I wouldn't put it past a *murderer*." The gray and brown tom lashed his tail.

"Shut up!" Bloodfur dug his claws into the ground, fighting the urge to leap at Cliffshade's throat.

"Cliffshade! Crowmask!" Cobratail shot in front of Bloodfur, glaring at the two warriors. "Back off." He growled. "We have no proof Bloodfur killed any cat."

The two warriors looked reluctant to agree. "That cat was born in blood." Crowmask growled.

"I could care less how he was born." Cobratail lashed his mottled tail. "Until we find any evidence, Bloodfur is innocent, and he is a warrior of ShadowClan. Is that understood?" The warriors grumbled and turned away.

"Fox hearts," Blackstorm grunted has he and the others reached them.

Foxshadow dipped his head to the deputy. "Cobratail, can I lead a patrol?"

"Of course." Cobratail paused. "You can refresh the scent markers by the WindClan border."

"Right." Foxshadow's eyes gleamed. "Let's go." He padded to the thorn tunnel, and Bloodfur followed with the others. He felt Cobratail's gaze on him and lashed his tail. *Does he expect me to thank him? I could have handled those flea brains! How dare he step in and defend me like I'm a kit?*

***

"Okay, are we ready?" Foxshadow's eyes gleamed as they neared the WindClan border.

Bloodfur blinked. *Are we ready..?* "We're just renewing the scent-"

The other cats looked amused. "No, silly," Blackstorm chuckled. "We don't have to do anything Cobratail says!"

"We're going to catch us some rabbits," Mottledface purred eagerly. "Swiftstalker'll lead." He nudged the black and white tom. "You should've seen some of the rabbits he's chased down! He's just as fast as those dumb WindClan cats!"

We're stealing prey? Bloodfur was startled. "Wait-I-"

"Go!" Revengeheart snapped, and the next thing he knew, every cat had raced out onto WindClan territory. Bloodfur felt frozen as he stared after them. *I can't steal prey! It's against the warrior code!* He considered this. *But then again... Why should I obey the code? What has it ever done for me?* He let out a growl and sprang to his paws, pelting after his companions. Mistybreeze was pouncing on a rabbit, digging her claws into it before biting its neck.

"Go, Swiftstalker!" He heard Blackstorm yowl and he saw the black and white tom racing across the moor with quick, graceful strides in pursuit of a rabbit. Bloodfur was amazed as he watched his old friend quickly match the speed of the rabbit and leap at it, pinning it onto its side and delivering the killing bite. *Mottledface wasn't kidding! Swiftstalker is the fastest cat I've ever-*

"Hey!"

He froze and spun to see a patrol of WindClan cats racing toward them, looking furious. "There's a patrol coming!" Bloodfur warned the others.

"So?" Revengeheart's eyes gleamed. He let out a snarl and raced toward the patrol. Blackstorm, Mottledface, and Foxshadow pelted after him, and Bloodfur watched in shock as they sprang into battle with the WindClan cats. Bloodfur was frozen, unsure of what to do.

Should I fight too?!

Mistybreeze quickly ran back toward the border, and Swiftstalker snatched up his rabbit, about to follow her when a large WindClan cat sprang onto him, bowling him over as he dropped his catch. "Oh no you don't!" The warrior spat and swiped his claws at Swiftstalker's muzzle. The black and white tom grunted as he tried to push the hefty cat off of him.

Bloodfur immediately leaped to Swiftstalker's aid. "Get off him!" He dug his claws into the warrior's side as he rolled him away from his friend.

The tom sprang away from Bloodfur, eyes lit with fury. "ShadowClan dung!" He crouched to attack.

"Enough!" One of the Windclan warriors spat and the cats sprang apart, glaring at one another. "What in StarClan's name do you think you're doing?" He snarled. "You can't trespass and steal our prey!"

Revengeheart bared his teeth. "ShadowClan can go wherever they like!" He sneered.

The WindClan cat let out a furious snarl, looking past them. "Those rabbits belong to WindClan!" Bloodfur turned to see Swiftstalker and Mistybreeze standing on ShadowClan's side of the border, their rabbits resting by their paws.

"Not anymore." Revengeheart retorted. "We caught it, so it's ours."

"You caught it on *our* territory!"

"Depthstar says we can hunt wherever we like." Revengeheart purred. "And if you try to stop us, we can fight."

Bloodfur was startled. *What? Depthstar never said that! What is Revengeheart trying to do?* The WindClan cats looked just as shocked. "If that's the case, you can guarantee this will be brought up at the next gathering!" The tom spat. "Depthstar has some explaining to do." He stepped forward. "Now get off our territory!"

Revengeheart dipped his head and stepped back. "As you wish, rabbit-face." As the warrior snarled with irritation, the ShadowClan cats raced back to the border.

Bloodfur skidded onto the ShadowClan side, panting heavily. After a moment, he raised his head to Revengeheart. "Why'd you say that?" He gasped. "You could get ShadowClan in big trouble!"

The black-legged warrior twitched his tail. "That's the point," He purred. "We make this clan of fox hearts look bad, and perhaps cause a battle. One that will injure ShadowClan warriors who deserve it." He paused. "After all they've done, Bloodfur, surely they deserve it?"

After a moment, Bloodfur lashed his tail, his thoughts clouded with darkness. "Yes. They do."

Revengeheart looked at his brother, who still held his rabbit in his jaws. "Give it to Bloodfur," He meowed before crouching over Mistybreeze's rabbit, taking a bite out of it.

Swiftstalker padded over to Bloodfur and lowered his head, dropping the rabbit at his paws. "Thanks for helping me back there," He meowed.

Bloodfur chose not to respond. *I don't want to talk to you. You've been ignoring me for moons. Why shouldn't I do the same to you?* He crouched and hesitated, looking at the rabbit. *This is against the warrior code. I'm supposed to bring this back to the elders. But why should I?* He thought of how rude Buzzardglare had been to him in the past. *The old fleabag doesn't deserve it.* He thought darkly. *Let him starve.* He sank his teeth into the rabbit.

Chapter 19

[image]

A paw prodded Bloodfur's side. He almost immediately jerked awake, his claws unsheathing as his eyes shot open. "No!" He gasped. He'd been uneasy about sleeping in the warriors den that night. So many cats hated him now, he was afraid of being murdered in his sleep. He half expected to see Crowmask or Cliffshade standing over him. He was relieved to see that it wasn't.

"Shh!" Revengeheart hissed, amber eyes glinting in the darkness."Are you *trying* to wake everyone up?" He looked impatient. Mottledface was standing beside the tom, his tail twitching.

"Get up!" The mottled tom whispered. "Come with us."

Bloodfur blinked, feeling drowsy with sleep. "What's going-"

"Come on!" With a lash of his white tail Revengeheart turned away. Mottledface followed, looking at Bloodfur impatiently.

He sighed and rose to his paws, quickly following his clanmates. They stopped just outside the den. "Ashcloud and Cliffshade are on guard," Revengeheart murmured. "This way." He turned, and Bloodfur followed, confused as they headed toward the apprentices den. He watched as Revengeheart pawed at a pile of leaves, sweeping them aside to reveal a gap in the bushes behind them. *A secret way out of the camp!* The warriors quickly ducked through the hole, and Bloodfur followed.

"How long has that been there?" He hissed to Revengeheart as they padded through the forest.

The tom let out a snort of amusement. "Don't tell me you never knew about it? We've been using it to sneak out of camp since we were apprentices!"

Why would you need to sneak out of camp? Bloodfur wondered. *Wait, why* are *we sneaking out of camp?* "Where are we going?" He asked.

"We're meeting a friend by the edge of the territory, just beyond carrion-place." Mottledface responded. "We meet him there every moon. We think you should meet him."

Bloodfur frowned. *It sounds like he's from another clan. Or maybe not a clan cat at all...* A few minutes ago, he'd been wanting to return to his nest and sleep. But now he was curious about who they were meeting. In addition, it was a warmer night than usual. He didn't mind going out into the forest. They continued beyond carrion-place until Revengeheart and Mottledface stopped near some lone trees.

Bloodfur blinked. "What are we-"

As he spoke, the bushes a few fox lengths away from them quivered, and a silver tabby tom stepped out, padding toward them. Bloodfur couldn't recognize him from any clan. He looked very close to Bloodfur's age.

"Castiel." Revengeheart dipped his head when he reached them.

The tabby's ice blue eyes flashed to Bloodfur. "Who's he?" He demanded.

Bloodfur was about to speak when Mottledface did it for him. "This is Bloodfur. He's decided to join us."

"Hmm." Castiel looked at him for a moment longer, then focused his attention on Revengeheart. "Will you be visiting us next moon?"

"Yes." Revengeheart responded. "But Poisonedsap is expecting more kits. She won't be able to attend."

Castiel narrowed his blue eyes. "My father has developed a plan and wishes to share it with you. *All* of you. Poisonedsap needs to hear it."

"I will pass the message on to my mother afterwards," Revengeheart assured him.

Bloodfur was surprised at how respectful his clanmate was acting toward this cat. Castiel's strange name made him think he had to be a kittypet or a rogue. Yet he spoke as though he held some level of authority.

Castiel hesitated. "Very well. Will Mistybreeze be absent too?"

"No," Revengeheart muttered. "Not yet, anyway."

Are Mistybreeze and Revengeheart having kits? Bloodfur wondered with a start. *I've never seen them that close...*

The silver tabby twitched his tail. "I'll see you next moon then." With that, he turned away, disappearing into the trees.

His clanmates began heading back in the direction they'd came, and Bloodfur padded alongside Revengeheart. "Is he a rogue?" He asked curiously.

The white tom shook his head. "He's a part of a group of cats. One that's even larger than our clan."

"They're going to help us destroy the clans." Mottledface added, amber eyes glowing with anticipation.

Destroy? That's a strong word. Bloodfur thought. *He must not mean it literally though...*

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Later that day, Bloodfur sat in the shadows of the camp, a half eaten mouse at his paws. He'd lost his appetite. He couldn't go five minutes without some cat looking at him like he was a badger ready to attack, or some cat hurling an insult at him. He didn't want to waste prey though. He looked across the clearing where Mistybreeze and Revengeheart lay together in the sunlight. He suppressed a twinge of jealousy. *He's a lucky cat, that's for sure.* He considered offering the rest of his mouse to them.

"Bloodfur?"

He bristled as Bloomfire's kits approached him, their eyes wide and

anxious. Bloodfur flattened his ears. "What do you want?" He muttered.

"Are you okay?" Heatpaw stared at him. "You're not yourself."

He glared at the orange and white tom. "I've been accused of murder and treated like a case of green-cough, Heatpaw," He snapped. "Do you think I'm okay?"

"We don't think you're a murderer!" Applepaw meowed. "You'd never kill anyone!"

Foxpaw nodded. "That's right. You're the greatest warrior in ShadowClan!"

"And the best brother we could ask for," Cardinalpaw added.

Bloodfur shot his apprentice a glare. "I'm not your brother," He growled. "Didn't your parents tell you?"

Applepaw looked at her paws. "Yes... But that doesn't matter. You've always been there for us."

"Since we were kits," Heatpaw added. "Even if we don't share the same parents, you'll always be our brother to us."

Bloodfur shot the four apprentices a glare. "I'm not your brother, okay?" He snapped. "Go away! You don't need to care about me!"

"I don't care that you're not my brother," Cardinalpaw stared at him with wide, sad green eyes. "I love you as much as I ever did."

"Well, you have no reason to." Bloodfur turned away. "I don't love you." A heartbeat after he spoke, he regretted it. He regretted it *so* much.

The apprentices were silent for a while before they turned away. After a moment, Bloodfur looked at them. The way they slowly walked looking down, he knew he'd upset them. Cardinalpaw more deeply than his siblings. The red tabby's tail was drooping. *He looked up to me. He loved me.* Bloodfur let out a long sigh. *I don't care. It's for the best that they stay away from me.* Past the

apprentices, he saw Flameheart and Bloomfire watching him. Hatred surged through him. He dug his claws into the earth.

"Bloodfur."

Now what? Cobratail approached him, glancing at Flameheart and Bloomfire before returning his gaze to Bloodfur. "I'd like to speak to you in the forest."

Bloodfur hesitated, eyeing the deputy uncertainly. *If he asks me about the deaths of those cats, I swear...* "Alright." He meowed after a moment.

He followed Cobratail out of camp. For a while it was silent, and Bloodfur wasn't sure what to do until the mottled tom turned to face him. "Your mother, Poppywing, was my sister. Did you know that?"

Bloodfur shook his head, surprised. *Me and the clan deputy are kin? That means Cobratail is my uncle...* But looking at him now, he could see the resemblance in their dark red pelts. "My mother must have been a red tabby too." He meowed quietly.

"Yes." Cobratail nodded. "But she was lighter than us. A bit like Cardinalpaw. And she had blue eyes."

He nodded quietly. As he imagined what Poppywing looked like, he began to realize something that sent chills up his spine. *The cat he's describing... She's the StarClan cat who spoke to me when I was a kit!* His mind spun. *She gave me the prophecy... Only the spilling of blood will save ShadowClan... Revenge will guide you.* "I've seen her," He whispered.

Cobratail blinked. "Hmm?"

"I've seen Poppywing." He meowed quietly. "She visited me in a dream when I was a kit."

The black and red tom looked startled for a moment before his gaze warmed. "Of course she did. You're her kit." He paused. "Bloodfur, you're my sister's kit. I've watched you grow into a fine warrior. Poppywing is so proud of you, I know she would be." He paused.

"And I know that Flameheart and Bloomfire are too." At the mention of his foster parents, Bloodfur looked away crossly.

"Please, don't be angry with them," Cobratail urged. "They were fine parents to you. They raised you and loved you as their own. Not every cat can do that for a kit who's not theirs." *I didn't come here to talk about Flameheart and Bloomfire!* Bloodfur thought angrily.

"Flameheart wasn't even your kin, yet he-"

"Cobratail, why don't you put me on a patrol?" Bloodfur rudely interrupted, fixing his yellow eyes on the tom. "That's what a deputy is supposed to do, right? Not lecture cats about their problems?"

The black and red tom held his gaze for a moment, offense flickering in his amber eyes. His tail lashed once before he spoke again. "You're better than this."

"Bloodfur!"

He was relieved when Revengeheart and Blackstorm raced over to them. "We're going hunting," Blackstorm announced. "Want to join us?"

"Of course," He was glad to get away from Cobratail. Without a word, he spun and raced away from the deputy, following his friends into the forest.

Chapter 20

[image]

Crickets chirped quietly in the grass as Bloodfur followed his companions through the night. A moon had passed since his talk with Cobratail. He was still annoyed about how the deputy had started talking about Flameheart and Bloomfire, as though he thought he could change his mind about them. *It's not his problem.* He'd thought furiously. *He should keep his nose in his own business.* He had no intentions of ever forgiving his foster parents, or his clanmates for the way they'd treated him. The way they were *still* treating him. And why should he? He had a group of cats around him now who actually appreciated him and needed him. And they were going to make the clans pay for their horrible ways.

A full moon hung in the sky. Bloodfur looked at the trees around him as he followed his friends through unfamiliar territory, his paws sore. He had no idea how long they'd been walking. It felt like forever, considering they'd had to stop by WindClan, ThunderClan, and RiverClan. He'd assumed that the only cats going to the meeting were his clanmates. But Tornadowind of WindClan, and Broadwing and Battalon of ThunderClan joined them, along with, to Bloodfur's surprise, Ravenfeather, the deputy of RiverClan. It seemed that ShadowClan weren't the only ones wanting vengeance on the clans. He sighed. They'd left just before sundown, and they still weren't at this place where Castiel's group would meet them. He shivered, the air cold against his pelt. *Where are we going? We're far beyond clan territory!*

He looked aside at Poisonedsap, whose belly was round with kits. He was still surprised that she'd decided to come when she was so close to kitting. She had been angry when Revengeheart told her he'd told Castiel she wasn't coming to the meeting.

"I'm pregnant, not crippled!" She'd spat at her son. "Of course I'm coming!"

But he could tell by the way the golden and black she-cat's pace

continued to slow that she was getting very tired. Revengeheart had suggested they take a break multiple times, but she kept insisting she was fine.

"How much further is it?" Bloodfur asked Mottledface, the closest cat to him. His legs were growing more and more tired with each step.

The tom twitched his ear. "Not far now. You'll pick up their scent soon."

It wasn't long before Bloodfur picked up the scent Mottledface had spoken of. It was definitely cat scent, but something else... It smelt different than any clan he knew. He opened his jaws to speak.

"I thought I smelt clan cats."

He nearly jumped out of his fur when the growl rumbled from a nearby bush, and he turned to see yellow eyes gleaming at them. As the group stopped, the white tom stepped out, and a heartbeat later Castiel appeared from behind a tree, dipping his head to the clan cats.

"Welcome," The silver tabby meowed. "We'll escort you to the camp."

"Thank you," Poisonedsap purred dryly, sounding exhausted. Castiel began leading the group through the forest while the white tom fell in at the back of the group. Bloodfur looked over his shoulder at him, startled as he got a better look at his face. The cat had a long V shaped split in each ear, and a long scar that ran from the top of his forehead and ended under his jaw, creating a line of symmetry down his face. *These cats have seen a lot of battles.* He thought.

They reached a small gap between a wall of bushes, and Castiel slipped inside, disappearing on the other side. *We're going in there?* Bloodfur hesitantly followed the others, leaves brushing his fur as he went through. When he emerged on the other side, he was surprised at what he saw.

They were in a large grassy clearing. There were cats everywhere,

some practicing battle moves, while others sat in conversation. He saw many dens made inside bushes, and a few nests between rocks or under ledges. A pile of fresh kill lay on the side of the clearing where a few cats were gathered, distributing prey among themselves. Not far from the pile, a thin stream ran through the clearing. *Wow...* Bloodfur thought as he looked around the camp. *It's like a clan!*

"Welcome to my camp."

He turned to see a black tom leaping down from a large tree stump, padding toward them on white paws, muscles showing beneath his pelt. He paused in front of the clan cats, his emerald green eyes flashing with surprise. "I was told you weren't coming, Poisonedsap." He commented.

Poisonedsap stepped toward him, her amber eyes gleaming. "Nothing could keep me from seeing you, Deserve," She purred.

"Hmmph." The tom twitched his ear.

Deserve? Did she say Deserve? Bloodfur stared at the black tom, his heartbeat quickening with unease. Brownstripe had told him about Deserve many seasons ago. *He was brought to ShadowClan with his littermates, Boost and Song, before he ran away after killing Brownstripe and Blackstorm's brother!*

He froze as Deserve rested his green gaze on him. "Who's this?"

"B-Bloodfur," He stammered uneasily. "My name's Bloodfur."

Revengeheart stepped to his side. "He's a new recruit." He told the black tom.

"Ah." Deserve dipped his head. "Welcome to Deserve's Army."

"Deserve's Army?" Bloodfur echoed.

The white-pawed tom nodded. "We are a group of cats who have joined together to fight against the cats who have wronged us." His eyes narrowed. "The clans."

"Yes." Bloodfur jumped as the white tom wove around him before sitting near Deserve. "The clans are always making life difficult for us rogues. So we joined together to do something about it."

"We won't step down until we can live in peace." Castiel stood beside his leader, light blue eyes shining with pride. "The cats in our army deserve to live happily."

"That's right." Deserve dipped his head at the silver tabby, pride flashing in his eyes before he looked back at Bloodfur. "I take it you've met my son, Castiel." He then looked to the white tom. "And this is one of my strongest soldiers, Papercut."

Castiel is Deserve's son? Bloodfur thought, surprised. *No wonder he speaks with such authority...* "You must be the deputy." He spoke his thoughts out loud.

Castiel blinked, looking confused. "Deputy?"

His father's eyes narrowed. "I have no deputy. My army will never adopt any of the clans ways." He paused, letting his gaze rake across the clan cats. "Swiftstalker isn't here?"

Poisonedsap shook her head. "He's staying behind to hear what we miss at the gathering." She stepped forward and wove around Deserve, wrapping her tail around his neck. "It could be valuable information."

"Yes." Deserve shouldered her away, his eyes flashing with irritation.

I can't believe she's flirting with him! Bloodfur thought, watching in disbelief as Poisonedsap sat down, gazing at the tom. *You have a mate, and you're expecting his kits!*

"Castiel tells us you have a plan?" Revengeheart prompted, his eyes lit with anticipation.

Deserve nodded, his eyes flicking to the camp entrance. "There are some cats out hunting. I'd like to wait for them to return before I call the meeting. Every cat must be present."

"But-" Blackstorm began. The leader shot him a glare, and Blackstorm lowered his head respectfully. "Of course, Deserve."

Deserve kept his gaze on the cat, hatred burning in his eyes, and Bloodfur remembered with a start that Blackstorm had been one of the kits to torment Deserve, Boost, and Song. Clearly there was still tension between them.

After a moment, Deserve shook out his pelt and looked away. "While we wait, you're welcome to eat." He flicked his tail to the fresh kill pile, then turned away.

Bloodfur hesitated while Poisonedsap, Revengeheart, and Mistybreeze followed Deserve. Blackstorm and Mottledface went to the fresh kill pile. Ravenfeather had gone to speak with Papercut, while the other cats settled on the side of the clearing.

Bloodfur's stomach rumbled as he looked at the fresh kill pile. *That walk really made me hungry... But should I take prey? Would it be rude to turn down Deserve's invite?* After a moment of hesitation, he decided to just get a drink. He padded past the fresh kill pile to the stream and crouched, aware of many eyes on him as he began lapping at the cool water. He ignored them and continued drinking until his thirst was quenched. He raised his head and glanced over his shoulder, droplets of water resting along his whiskers. A dark gray-brown tom and a ginger tabby she-cat watched him, looking distrustful. Bloodfur understood. If it was true that most of these rogues had bad experiences with the clans, of course they didn't like having clan cats around.

He hesitantly settled close to the barrier of bushes, laying down and resting his chin on his paws. *I wonder how long it'll take for those cats to come back from hunting... We can't stay too long. Some cat is bound to realize we're gone!* His eyelids grew heavy, and he closed them. *I might as well rest for a while...*

"Bloodfur."

His eyes snapped open at Deserve's voice. He looked up to see the dark furred tom standing over him. *Did I fall asleep?* He wondered. *It couldn't have been for long...* The moon was still high in the sky. "Y-

yes?"

"I'd like to speak with you." He paused. "Alone in the forest."

Bloodfur's stomach twisted with anxiety. *Why does he want to talk to me? Did I do something wrong?* "Uh-O-okay," He responded hesitantly.

"Come." The tom turned away, heading for the entrance, and Bloodfur quickly got to his paws, following.

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Bloodfur walked close to Deserve, his pelt prickling uneasily. He was in unfamiliar territory with a cat who had committed murder as a kit. The tom didn't speak, and it made Bloodfur even more nervous. *Has he brought me out here to kill me?*

"Poisonedsap told me everything," Deserve meowed after a while.

He looked at him uneasily. "Everything?"

Deserve nodded. "You were born in blood, and your medicine cat deemed it as an omen. I hear you were raised by cats who you thought were your parents. You grew up tangled in lies." He paused, glancing at him. "Is that right?" When Bloodfur nodded, he went on. "And your clanmates treated you like sickness for it."

Bloodfur looked away, anger pulsing deep inside him as he thought of his clanmates. "They accused me of murder." He muttered.

"I understand exactly how you feel," Deserve meowed.

He looked at the white-pawed tom in surprise. "You do?"

Deserve lowered his green gaze to the ground. "I was brought into ShadowClan with my siblings after my mother abandoned us. Our father was killed by a monster. He was the only cat able to provide for us, as my mother couldn't hunt. So she brought us to your clan where she hoped we would be cared for." He paused. "We were so afraid. We'd just lost everything."

Bloodfur felt sympathy for the dark tom. "I'm sorry," He murmured.

"A queen named Sunflower took us in," Deserve went on. "She was the mother of Blackstorm, Brownstripe, and Snakekit." His eyes narrowed. "We were terrified and heartbroken after losing our parents, and you know what those rotten kits did?"

"Brownstripe told me they teased you." Bloodfur shuffled his paws.

Deserve's eyes flashed at him. "Is that what he called it?" He growled. "Is attacking other kits to the point where blood is drawn seen as just *teasing?"*

He was startled to hear this. *Brownstripe never told me they hurt Deserve, Boost, and Song that badly!*

"And you know why they did it?" Deserve growled, his tail lashing. "Because we were rogues. We were born in a barn, and they were born in a clan. And that gave them the right to hurt us. One day, I had enough. I couldn't stand watching my brother and sister suffer any longer. So I attacked Snakekit."

"You killed him," Bloodfur rasped.

"I didn't mean to!" Deserve shot back in a snarl, and Bloodfur jumped. "My father taught me to hunt before he died. The killing bite was the only move I knew." He paused. "You should have seen the looks on their faces! They looked at me like I was a monster. And so I ran away, because no cat would ever understand what I'd done. I was protecting my siblings. But you know what?" He growled softly. "I'm glad I killed him. He deserved it. I should've killed Blackstorm and Brownstripe too at the time."

Bloodfur hesitated. "Brownstripe is dead now..."

Deserve's eyes gleamed like emeralds in the night. "You think I don't know that? Who do you think did the deed?" He flexed his claws. "I've killed many clan cats since."

He's a murderer... Bloodfur eyed Deserve, suddenly afraid that he would be his next victim. But the dark furred tom's eyes grew sympathetic. "I know exactly how you're feeling, Bloodfur. You're

exactly like I was after I left ShadowClan. Heartbroken, but hungry for revenge." He meowed. "You were born in blood. I was born in a barn. And those are the reasons we were hurt."

[image]

Bloodfur stared at him, realizing how much he had in common with the rogue leader. "Exactly! What does it matter where we were born? It doesn't shape who we are!"

"It's something the clans will always fail to understand," Deserve spat. "And cats will continue to suffer just as you and I have because of it." He stepped toward. "But not if we do something about it. I will not rest until the clans have suffered for what they did to us. I struck back at them. I let them know I would not tolerate their hatred." He narrowed his eyes. "So what are *you* going to do, Bloodfur?"

Deserve held his gaze for a moment before turning away and heading back the way they'd come, leaving Bloodfur alone with his thoughts.

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"Cats of the army and the clans!" Deserve yowled from atop the tree stump, his voice deep and confident. "A plan to prepare us for the final battle has been formed!"

Bloodfur sat among the cats below, looking up at him with interest. Some time had past since his talk with Deserve. And he knew that he was right. Nothing was going to get better, not for himself, not for any cat unless he did something about it. They needed to do whatever it took to make the clans suffer for their mistreatment of others.

Before the meeting, he'd spoken to some other cats in the army. A tom named Wolf had been passing through RiverClan territory with his pregnant mate. The RiverClan cats had chased the two rogues, threatening to harm them, and in panic, his mate had tried to cross the stepping stones too quickly and fell in. She drowned and the clans had done nothing to help. Another cat named Bonfire had

made his nest near fourtrees during leaf-bare, but was forced to leave when the clans found him. He'd barely survived leaf-bare because of it, as it took a long time for him to find shelter elsewhere.

More and more cats revealed their stories to Bloodfur and the others, making him feel even more angry about the clans. *I didn't realize how horribly they treated rogues!* He knew now without a doubt he needed vengeance. For himself, for Deserve... For all of them.

"We are not quite strong enough at the moment to take on the five clans," Deserve continued. "And Ivy's kits are not strong enough to participate in the battle. In order to even it out, the clans numbers must be lessened." He narrowed his eyes at the clan cats. "Do you understand?"

"Yes." Revengeheart's eyes gleamed. "We are trying to provoke a battle between ShadowClan and WindClan."

Tornadowind lashed his long striped tail. "I will cross the border tomorrow and leave my scent on your territory. If Depthstar accuses WindClan of trespassing when Gladestar's already angry..."

"A battle is a sure thing." Blackstorm purred.

"Good," Deserve rumbled. "But we've been focusing too much on ShadowClan. Next moon, we will launch our attack on a Riverclan patrol."

"I'll send them your way," Ravenfeather growled.

Deserve's eyes gleamed at the deputy. "Perfect." He paused. "Papercut's idea to attack the medicine cats at highstones was a good one, and very successful." He nodded to the white tom. "We must eliminate the medicine cats. The clans are nothing without them."

Bloodfur twitched his ear. *So they did that too!*

"Yes, Starfaith was killed." Tornadowind grumbled. "But we still have Silverberry. And she's old, so she's bound to take another

apprentice soon."

"And Dewstorm survived." Revengeheart lashed his tail. "He even has an apprentice now."

A growl rumbled in Deserve's throat. "The medicine cats must be killed. Every one of them. I need a cat to lead this mission." He paused, looking at the cats below. After a moment, he rested his gaze on Bloodfur. "You, Bloodfur."

"Me?" Bloodfur's eyes widened.

"Yes." Deserve gazed at him. "You will have one of the most important roles in this plan. Every medicine cat must be killed in order for us to succeed. Can I trust you with the job?"

Bloodfur's stomach twisted as he thought about killing medicine cats, the most important cats in a clan. He didn't know if he could kill anyone. *But I bet they're all just like Hawkfeather... Surely he told them about me. They must think I'm a bad omen, too. And so many cats are counting on me!* He raised his head, the anxiety vanishing as he spoke confidently. "I won't let you down, Deserve."

Allegiance Update #4

Shadowclan

Leader: Depthstar - Very dark blue-gray tom with a lighter front left paw, dark blue eyes.

Deputy: Cobratail - Mottled dark red and black tabby tom with amber eyes.

Medicine Cat: Dewstorm - Spotted gray tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Creampaw

Warriors

Crowmask - Black tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Tinypaw

Ashcloud - Dark gray and white tom with pale green eyes.

Apprentice, Foxpaw

Cougarfoot - Golden brown tom with a white muzzle, black ear tips and tail tip, amber eyes.

Cliffshade - Dark brown and gray tom with a white underbelly, yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Heatpaw

Flameheart - Ginger tabby tom with green eyes.

Apprentice, Honeypaw

Bloomfire - Orange she-cat with white paws, muzzle, and chin, dark ginger ears.

Copperstripe - Dark golden ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Applepaw

Timberstorm - Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Blackstorm - Black tom with yellow eyes.

Foxshadow - Black and very dark ginger tom with a bushy tail, dark amber eyes.

Apprentice, Amberpaw

Stripednose - Tortoiseshell tom with white paws, chest, and muzzle, black mark on his nose, blue eyes.

Mottledface - Mottled brown tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Spiderpaw

Boost - Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. Former loner.

Song - White she-cat with light blue eyes. Former loner.

Revengeheart- Battle scarred white tom with jet black legs, yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Falconpaw

Swiftstalker- Black and white tom with blue eyes.

Bloodfur- Dark reddish brown tabby tom with a nick in his right ear, yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Cardinalpaw

Mistybreeze - Silver-gray she-cat with darker points, light blue eyes.

Coldpebble - Dark gray tom with darker points, dark blue eyes.

Apprentices

Creampaw - Brown and cream tabby she-cat with blue eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Tinypaw - Small brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes.

Honeypaw - Golden-red and cream tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Spiderpaw - Black and dark gray tom with dark amber eyes.

Amberpaw- Orange and gold she-cat with amber eyes.

Falconpaw- Dark ginger tabby tom with black tufted ears, amber eyes.

Cardinalpaw - Reddish orange tabby tom with green eyes.

Heatpaw - Dark ginger and white tom with yellow eyes.

Foxpaw - Orange and white she-cat with black legs and ears, a fluffy white tipped tail, green eyes.

Applepaw - Yellow tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Queens

Greenpine - Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes. Mother to Cliffshade's kits:

Ebonykit - Dark brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Flintkit - Orange tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Poisonedsap - Dark golden brown she-cat with dark brown muzzle, throat, nose blaze, black chin, ears, paws, and tail tip, amber eyes. Expecting Cougarfoot's kits.

Elders

Buzzardglare- Dark brown tabby tom with one blind eye, yellow eyes.

Bluerain - Light blue gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes.

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Thunderclan

Leader: Strawberrystar - Speckled reddish-ginger and cream she-cat with amber eyes.

Deputy: Snowfalcon - Broad shouldered white tom with amber eyes.

Medicine Cat: Spicewhisker - Small black tom with a white muzzle, tail tip, and front right paw, yellow eyes.

Warriors

Broadwing - Broad shouldered dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Oaktuft - Brown and cream tabby tom with amber eyes.

Morningmist - Light gray tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Chillwhisker - Light gray tabby tom with light blue eyes.

Cedarnose - Dark brown tabby tom with a white splashed muzzle and paws, amber eyes.

Vanillafern - Creamy colored tabby she-cat with pale yellow eyes.

Battalon - Smoky black tom with gray-brown muzzle and underbelly, amber eyes.

Darkoak- Very dark brown tom with swirled black stripes, amber eyes.

Windclan

Leader: Gladestar - Light golden yellow tabby she-cat with pale greenish yellow eyes.

Deputy: Monarchwing - Orange she-cat with black spots and ear

tips, golden yellow muzzle, chin, nose blaze, chest, and tail tip, darker orange paws, yellowish green eyes.

Medicine Cat: Silverberry - Silver she-cat with a darker front left paw, tail tip, and right ear, green eyes.

Warriors

Firetail - Orange tom with a darker reddish tail and ears, amber eyes.

Jaggedear - Brown tabby tom with a torn left ear, green eyes.

Driftrunner - Dark golden brown tom with very thick black classic tabby stripes, muzzle, chin, ears, paws, chest, and underbelly, amber eyes.

Willowtail- Light gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

Whitehare - White tom with light green eyes.

Tornadowind - Dark gray tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Queens

Clovernose - Brown and white she-cat with green eyes.

Riverclan

Leader: Frostedstar - White tom with pale blue eyes.

Deputy: Ravenfeather - Black tom with amber eyes.

Medicine Cat: Otterpelt - Red-brown she-cat with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Sagepaw

Warriors

Frozenripple - Long furred silver tom with swirled white stripes, pale blue eyes.

Lemonsplash - White tom with yellow patches, yellow eyes.

Pebblestep - Mottled gray tom with white paws, pale green eyes.

Petalfin - Silver, black, dark gray, and white splashed she-cat with blue eyes.

Apprentices

Sagepaw - Silver and black tabby she-cat with pale blue-green eyes. The medicine cat apprentice.

Skyclan

Leader: Ravenstar - Long furred black tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Sandblaze - Light golden yellow tom with light brown-ginger paws, mark on chest, ears, chin, and yellowish blaze on forehead and tail tip. Yellow eyes.

Medicine Cat: Ryeheart - Brown tabby tom with dark brown tabby legs, tail, ears, and nose blaze, creamy chin, muzzle, chest, and tail tip, amber eyes.

Warriors

Tigerleap - Dark golden brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Brackenleaf - Dark ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Deserve's Army

Leader: Deserve - Black tom with white paws, emerald green eyes.

Healers

Shimmer - Silver spotted tabby she-cat, pale amber eyes.

Coco - Dark brown tabby she-cat, green eyes.

Soldiers

Castiel - Silver tabby tom with light blue eyes.

Crow - Black tom with a white front left paw, amber eyes.

Papercut - Thin white tom with a scar down the center of his face, pale yellow eyes.

Wolf - Very thick furred dark brown-gray tom with a white muzzle, yellow eyes.

Bonfire - Fiery ginger tom with black patches, amber eyes.

Sunset - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Sorrel - Orange tabby she-cat with darker ginger ears and tail, pale green eyes.

Timber - Brown tabby tom with a torn ear, green eyes.

Patch - White tom with brown patches, blue eyes.

Coke - Black tom with dark gray spotted legs, dark blue eyes.

Screech - Black tom with amber eyes.

Queens

Ivy - Dark brown tabby she-cat with white patches, green eyes. Mother to Wolf's kits:

Talon - Dark gray-brown tom, yellow eyes.

Snowflake - silver she-cat with white spots, pale blue eyes.

Misty - Dark gray tabby she-cat, pale green eyes.

Chapter 21

[image]

Just a little closer... Bloodfur thought, his yellow eyes fixed on his next victim. He crouched in the marsh, his belly brushing the cool earth. *Come on...* He waited a moment as his thoughts were obeyed and unsheathed his claws, springing forward. "Ha!" He pounced on the vole, swiftly lowering his head to deliver the killing bite. The little creature squeaked once, then fell silent. Bloodfur released it, licking blood from his muzzle. *See?* He told himself. *That wasn't so bad. How can killing a cat be any different?*

He'd had a few moments where he began reconsidering his decision to follow Deserve's order. He'd never killed a cat before. And this was exactly why his clanmates didn't trust him! If he killed someone, he would only be proving them right. But these thoughts never stayed for long. *I don't want to prove them wrong anymore.* He thought. *I just want vengeance on them. Some of these cats deserve to die.* He flexed his claws as he thought of Crowmask and Cliffshade. *Especially them... But I'll take care of the medicine cats first.*

"Nice catch, Bloodfur!"

He looked over his shoulder as Revengeheart approached him, flanked by Mistybreeze and Mottledface.

"Thanks," Bloodfur purred, blinking happily at the three cats. Growing up, he'd never had a lot of friends around him. These cats gave him a feeling of purpose and belonging that he'd never felt before. "Do any of you want to share?"

The white tom twitched his ear. "It's all yours."

"We're stuffed." Mottledface burped, swiping his tongue over his muzzle.

Bloodfur crouched and began eating his vole. He was always aware that he was breaking the warrior code when he ate his catch. He

hadn't brought anything back for the clan in moons. But he'd done this so much now, it had begun feeling natural. He felt no wrong in doing it.

Beside Revengeheart, Mistybreeze twitched her ear and looked aside, seeming to have spotted something. She ran off into the marsh. Her mate glanced at her sharply. "What're you doing?"

Mistybreeze didn't respond, disappearing among the tall grass. Bloodfur paused from eating, watching curiously. A moment later, she returned with a large thrush in her jaws, lifting her head proudly.

"Wow," Bloodfur couldn't resist complimenting her. "Great catch!"

The silver she-cat dropped the bird at her paws and blinked at him, looking surprised. "Oh, thanks."

Revengeheart twitched his tail. "I've caught better." He shouldered her aside and crouched over the bird, ripping off a wad of feathers.

She didn't say you could have it. Bloodfur thought with an irritated twitch of his tail. *And you could have complimented her. You're her mate, for StarClan's sake!* When he and Revengeheart finished eating, the four of them returned to camp. As they emerged from the thorn tunnel, several cats looked at him.

"Bloodfur," Ashcloud grunted from where he sat near the fresh kill pile.

"Keeping him around the camp..." Cliffshade growled loudly enough for him to hear. "Does Depthstar have bees in his brain?"

Outside of the nursery, Ebonykit and Flintkit had been playing, their mother watching. But when Greenpine saw Bloodfur, she quickly murmured something to the kits, sweeping her tail around them and swiftly herding them into the nursery.

The three newest warriors, Spiderfang, Amberrose, and Falconclaw sat near the warriors den, practicing battle moves. Spiderfang spotted him. "Hey, Bloodfur!" An upper tooth hung past his mouth on each side like a bat's. His little fangs were the reason Depthstar

had given him the name.

"Will you teach us the killing bite?" Amberrose prompted, her tail high in the air. "I bet you've mastered it!"

Her brothers purred in amusement, and Bloodfur lashed his tail angrily. "You-"

"Bloodfur!"

He started at Depthstar's snap, and he looked toward him. The clan leader was sitting near his den, his eyes narrowed. Beside him, Cardinalpaw sat, looking at his paws. *Great, what now?*

"Come here, right now." Depthstar ordered.

"Better go see what the old fleabag wants," Revengeheart muttered.

Bloodfur flattened his ears, huffing out a sigh. He padded across the clearing to the clan leader. "Yes, Depthstar?" He grumbled.

"Have you trained Cardinalpaw today?" Depthstar demanded.

He glanced at his apprentice, feeling a rush of annoyance. *Fox dung! I completely forgot about him!* "No," He mumbled.

"Yesterday?"

"I forgot."

Depthstar let out a hiss of annoyance as he stepped closer to Bloodfur. "I've never had a warrior who *forgets* to train their apprentice!" He lashed his dark tail. "What's wrong with you? Cardinalpaw has been too nervous to approach you because he thinks you don't want him around!"

"Well, I *don't* want him around!" Bloodfur glared at Cardinalpaw. The small red tabby was staring at his paws sadly, his ears flat.

Depthstar's blue eyes widened. "He's your apprentice!"

"Well I wish he wasn't!" Bloodfur snarled, pushing his muzzle close

to Depthstar's. "I wish I didn't have an apprentice to waste my time with!" He heard a tiny whining sound come from Cardinalpaw, but he ignored it. "Give him a new mentor."

A low growl rumbled in the clan leader's throat. "I never thought I'd hear any mentor say such a thing in front of their own apprentice." He glanced around, then lowered his voice. "Bloodfur, there are cats here who want you exiled." He growled. "Some even want you dead."

What, I had no idea! He snorted.

"Me and Cobratail are working hard for you because we don't believe you're a murderer. If you want a place in this clan, you'd better start proving we're making the right decision." He narrowed his eyes. "That means training your apprentice and bringing back prey for your clan." As Bloodfur blinked in surprise, he added, "You think I don't smell the prey on your muzzle right now?"

Bloodfur's tail lashed slowly back and forth. He was aware of many cats watching him. Judging him.

"So go out with your apprentice." Depthstar lashed his tail. "Now."

He glanced at the young cat. Cardinalpaw lifted his head, his green eyes round with hurt. Bloodfur looked away. "He's not my apprentice." With that, he spun and raced out of camp, hearing cats gasping in shock behind him.

He ran through the forest until he reached the burnt sycamore and sighed, sitting down beside the trunk. *I'm too busy for an apprentice! I have a special role in Deserve and Poisonedsap's plan! Cardinalpaw would just get in the way.* Besides, the apprentice was a constant reminder of Flameheart and Bloomfire's lies. He didn't want to even look at him anymore.

"What's wrong with you?"

He nearly jumped out of his pelt at the whisper behind him. He spun to see Swiftstalker staring at him.

"For Starclan's sake!" Bloodfur huffed, his fur slowly flattening. "Are

you trying to give me a heart attack? How'd you sneak up on me like that?"

The black and white warrior shrugged. "Isn't that what I'm best at?"

Bloodfur grunted agreement, and it was quiet for a minute. Swiftstalker glanced over his shoulder cautiously, then returned his gaze to Bloodfur. "How could you do this to Cardinalpaw?" He whispered. "You're his brother. He loves you."

"He's not my brother!" Bloodfur snapped.

"You are to him!" The warrior shot back, his blue eyes flashing with anger. "I can't believe you! Why are you even hanging out with us? Why would you get yourself involved?"

Bloodfur bristled. "What-you don't want me around?" He demanded. "You mean like when we were apprentices?"

Swiftstalker's ears flattened. "I never wanted to stop being your friend."

He blinked, baffled. "Then why did you?"

"Poisoned-" Swiftstalker broke off and fell silent for a moment. "Look," He muttered. "You're different from Revengeheart, Mottledface, Blackstorm... All of them. You don't belong with us."

"Of course I do." Bloodfur growled.

The back and white cat glared at him. "No, you don't. I know you, Bloodfur. You'll never be able to carry out Deserve's order."

Anger flared up inside him. "Watch me!" He snarled before racing away.

***

The next morning, Bloodfur, Revengeheart, Poisonedsap, and Mottledface went to fourtrees to meet with followers in the other clans. a low fog drifted across the clearing. Bloodfur sat on the great rock, waiting impatiently for the others.

"Where are they?" Mottledface huffed.

Poisonedsap twitched her ear. "Be patient," She growled. "Don't forget Ravenfeather is a deputy. It's harder for him to get away."

Bloodfur looked down from the great rock at the fog drifting softly over the grass. *"Only the spilling of blood will save ShadowClan."* A voice breathed in his ear, and he froze. *Poppywing!* He looked around him for his mother, but only he and his clanmates were there. He returned his gaze to the ground and gasped. The fog had formed into cloudy forms of cats sitting below, looking up at him with white eyes. *"Revenge will guide you."* They all whispered in sync. *"You must spill blood!"*

"No!" Bloodfur gasped and backed away, his heart racing with terror.

Teeth grasped his scruff, and he gasped, thinking it was one of the ghostly cats below. But he twisted his head and saw that it was Poisonedsap. He realized he was on the edge of the rock and quickly steadied himself as she released him, blinking in bewilderment. Revengeheart and Mottledface were staring at him like he was insane.

"What are you doing?" She exclaimed sharply. "You're lucky I caught you before you fell and broke a leg!"

"Thanks." Bloodfur looked down to the clearing nervously. To his relief, the ghostly cats were gone and the fog was normal once more. "I-I thought I heard something."

The queen grunted while Revengeheart and Mottledface chuckled. Not long after, Ravenfeather, Broadwing, Battalon, Tornadowind, and a RiverClan queen named Clovernose arrived. They spoke for some time.

"Poisonedsap," Clovernose purred. "My kits have become apprentices."

Poisonedsap's amber eyes gleamed. "Wonderful! More claws for the battle." She glanced at her stomach. "Mine should arrive soon."

Ravenfeather twitched his tail. "While Bloodfur is taking care of the medicine cats, I think it's a good idea to get rid of the strongest warriors." He looked to Broadwing. "I'll send a warrior and her apprentice to the ThunderClan border at dusk. They should be alone." His eyes narrowed. "Can you and Battalon take care of them?" The ThunderClan warriors nodded, eyes gleaming.

"Bloodfur," Poisonedsap turned her attention to him. "How will you go about killing the medicine cats?"

He hesitated. "Attacking while they're with their clans seems too risky," He meowed. "Papercut's attack on Dewstorm and Starfaith at highstones went well. The medicine cats meet there tomorrow night." He twitched his tail. "We can take out more than one, but I can't do it alone."

"Me, Mottledface, and Foxshadow will join you," Revengeheart decided.

Bloodfur shook his head. "I don't think there should be many clan cats," He meowed. "If any cat survives and picks up our scent, we're caught. I'd like some of Deserve's soldiers to join me."

Poisonedsap nodded slowly, her eyes shining. "Well thought out. But I'm not up to making another trip to see Deserve."

"I'm going to introduce my kits to Deserve's Army tonight," Clovernose meowed. "I can pass Bloodfur's message to him."

Bloodfur dipped his head. "Thank you. Tell him to have a group meet me by carrionplace."

Clovernose nodded, and Poisonedsap purred loudly. "Once the medicine cats are dead, nothing can get in our way." Her eyes shone. "Revenge will be served to those wretched clans."

Chapter 22

[image]

The next day, Bloodfur stalked through the grass, eyes fixed on a mouse. He was out hunting with his friends again. He enjoyed practicing his skills, considering he would have to use them on something much bigger than prey tonight. Something silver streaked past him and Bloodfur blinked, watching as Mistybreeze pounced on the mouse, swiftly biting it's neck.

I was going to catch that. He hesitated before stepping out, heading toward her. "Good catch," He meowed and she spun to face him, startled. "I was hesitating too long."

"Oh." Mistybreeze twitched her tail. "Sorry. I didn't realize you were stalking it too."

"It's okay," Bloodfur meowed. She buried her catch and glanced at him warily before turning away. *She really doesn't want to talk to me.* He thought with a pang of regret. *I shouldn't have told her and Coldpebble that I didn't want them around... But maybe that's not all. Maybe she thinks I really did kill Diamondrain...* He hesitated before stepping to her side. "I didn't kill your mother," He blurted out without thinking.

Mistybreeze stopped and looked at him sharply, holding his gaze for a moment. "I know you didn't," She meowed at last. "You wouldn't hurt anyone." She paused. "At least, not with your claws."

Bloodfur felt a pang of guilt. *She and Coldpebble* are *still hurt about what I said!* Ever since he'd started hanging around Revengeheart and the others, He had assumed everything was fine between he and Mistybreeze. But obviously he'd been wrong. She started walking away, and Bloodfur found himself padding alongside her. He had to say something. He tried to gather the right words. Mistybreeze didn't look at him, seeming uncomfortable.

When he still hadn't found the right words, he figured he'd just go

with the ones that had been stored in his mind for seasons. "I'm sorry about what I said to you and Coldpebble all those moons ago." He meowed quietly.

The silver she-cat glanced at him, but said nothing. He decided to go on. "I've been wanting to apologize since the moment I said it, but the time was never right, and I didn't think you or your brother wanted to hear anything I had to say." He paused, deciding not to mention Swiftstalker's influence on his actions. *If he hadn't yelled at me that day, I might not have taken it out on Mistybreeze and Coldpebble.* "I had a lot going on, and I didn't mean to take it out on you. I'm sorry."

Mistybreeze didn't respond right away, and Bloodfur's stomach twisted as he wondered if she would reject his apology. *Please forgive me..!*

"I forgive you, Bloodfur," She said after a moment, and he relaxed a little. But she still looked quite uncomfortable. "We should go back to the group." She quickly turned away and raced back through the trees.

I can't tell if that went well or not... He thought, hesitating before following her. *But at least she forgives me...*

***

He and his companions returned to camp and he quickly joined them under the shadows of a pine tree at the side of the clearing. Revengeheart and Mistybreeze lay near him. Near the apprentices den, Cardinalpaw was speaking to Timberstorm, his new mentor. The apprentice caught Bloodfur's eye, then looked away.

Bloodfur twitched his tail, suppressing a feeling of guilt. *Timberstorm will be a better mentor to him, anyway. He'll show him how to be a cruel, selfish clan cat, just like him.*

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the rock for a clan meeting!"

He looked at the meeting rock where Depthstar sat, sunlight

gleaming on his sleek pelt. As the clan began gathering, many cats glanced at Bloodfur with cold, distrustful glares. *You'll pay.* Bloodfur thought, gritting his teeth. *You'll pay when you find your medicine cats dead tonight.*

"It's time! It's time!"

He glanced at the nursery as Ebonykit and Flintkit raced out, their short tails sticking up like reeds. "We're going to be apprentices!" Ebonykit squeaked eagerly, looking back at her brother. "Hurry up!"

"I'm nervous!" The little orange tabby exclaimed, hanging back anxiously. His mother leaned over him and licked his ear.

"Don't worry," Greenpine purred. "It'll be alright."

"Ebonykit, Flintkit." Depthstar gazed down at the kits as they neared, staring up at him. "You have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. Ebonykit, from this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Ebonypaw."

"Ebonypaw! Ebonypaw!" The clan yowled. *If only they were that enthusiastic when I was made an apprentice...* He thought, lashing his tail.

"Revengeheart,"

The white tom looked up sharply, clearly startled. "What?"

"You are ready to take on an apprentice. I expect you to pass on all you know to Ebonypaw."

"An apprentice?" Revengeheart hissed under his breath. "You've got to be kidding me!"

Depthstar looked to the warrior, and many other cats followed his gaze. "Revengeheart, come forward."

Mistybreeze nudged her mate. "Go on," She muttered.

He glared at her before huffing out a sigh and rising to his paws, his

tail lashing as he crossed the clearing. Ebonypaw stared at the broad shouldered warrior anxiously. Revengeheart looked reluctant as he bumped noses with the little tabby. Ebonypaw said something, and he looked irritated as he responded. The apprentice's ears flattened.

Depthstar turned his attention to Flintkit, who was watching his sister with the warrior in awe, clearly eager to receive his own mentor. "Flintkit, from this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Flintpaw. Your mentor will be Swiftstalker."

"Flintpaw! Flintpaw!" The clan cheered as Swiftstalker padded over to his new apprentice, letting out a friendly purr. Flintpaw eagerly touched noses with him.

"Now," Depthstar went on. "I believe it's time for two young cats to be made warriors." He looked into the crowd as Swiftstalker and Revengeheart moved to the side of the clearing with their apprentices. "Tinypaw, Honeypaw, come forward."

The two she-cats padded forward, gazing up at their leader excitedly.

"I, Depthstar, leader of ShadowClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these three apprentices." He went on. "They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn."

Dewstorm and Creampaw sat outside of the apprentices den. Bloodfur noticed the cream and brown she-cat staring at her sisters enviously. *She won't get her full name yet.* He remembered.

"Tinypaw, Honeypaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," The sisters meowed in chorus, their eyes shining.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Tinypaw, Honeypaw, from this moment you will be known as Tinylark and Honeyrose," The clan leader meowed. "StarClan

honors your courage and skill, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ShadowClan." He paused. "Brownstripe and Rosebreeze would be very proud of you."

"Tinylark! Honeyrose!" The clan cheered, and Creampaw yowled out her sisters new names, bounding over to meet them. The three sisters purred and bumped heads affectionately.

"Congratulations!" Creampaw purred. "You're going to be great warriors!"

"And you'll be a great medicine cat," Honeyrose purred, nuzzling her.

Creampaw sighed. "Whenever I get my name!"

"How about tonight?" Dewstorm appeared behind his apprentice.

The she-cat spun, her blue eyes wide. "Really?" She gasped. "You think I'm ready?"

The gray spotted tom nodded, yellow eyes shining. "I know you are."

Creampaw let out an excited squeal and bumped her head against his. "Thank you, thank you! I can't wait for the meeting!" Cardinalpaw ran to her side, purring a greeting.

You'll regret saying that. Bloodfur thought as he watched the medicine cats, a coldness gripping his heart. *There's going to be a lot of dead cats... And you and Dewstorm may be among them.*

***

The air was warm and thick that night. A half moon shone in the sky. Bloodfur ran through the trees, Mottledface by his side. The warrior had decided to accompany him on his mission. They had almost reached the border when Bloodfur paused by a muddy pool. "We should roll ourselves in the mud here," He suggested. "It'll hide our scent and disguise us. We don't want any cat recognizing us."

Mottledface's eyes gleamed. "If any cat lives to tell anyone," He

joked. "But you're right, good idea."

The two cats started rolling in the mud. Bloodfur hated the feeling of the thick disgusting liquid soaking into his fur, but knew going without it would be a huge risk. He raised a muddy paw and spread it over his face, cringing at the feeling. *I swear to StarClan, I'll have to jump into the river when this is all over!* He and Mottledface dragged themselves out of the pool, shaking extra mud from their pelts. He could already feel it drying into his fur. It felt very uncomfortable.

Mottledface looked at him, letting out an amused purr. "We'll have to start calling you Mudfur."

He scooped up a pawful of mud and threw it at the tom's face. "Mudface." He chuckled. "Come on, Deserve's cats are waiting."

They passed carrionplace and sat in wait. It only took a few moments for the soldiers to arrive. Papercut was in the lead, followed by Wolf, Bonfire, Sunset, and Screech.

"Papercut," Mottledface greeted. "Good to see you."

"Yes," Papercut grunted, twitching his white tail. "So how many medicine cats are going to be there?"

Bloodfur did a quick count in his head. "Seven."

The white tom nodded. "Alright. Let's go."

No one spoke as they ran through the night to highstones. The medicine cats would already be there. With a start, Bloodfur wondered if they would catch them while they were dreaming. *That would make this much easier!* They slowed their pace as they neared the moonstone cave. Bloodfur grew nervous, peering through the dark tunnel. He couldn't see any cat from here, but he knew they must be inside. He looked back at his companions. "They must be asleep in there," He whispered. "If we hurry, we can take care of them now..." The other cats nodded, eyes narrowed. Bloodfur drew in a deep breath before crawling through the tunnel, aware of the others falling in behind him. He stopped when he emerged into the

cave.

The medicine cats lay asleep around the moonstone. The cave shone with it's luminous icy glow. Dewstorm and Creampaw were settled close to each other, their flanks rising and falling softly as they slept. On the opposite side of the apprentice, Spicewhisker lay curled up with his tail over his muzzle, his ear twitching. Otterpelt and Sagepaw slept soundly near him. A little ways away from the RiverClan cats, Ryeheart and Silverberry lay.

Bloodfur drew in a breath. *Alright... Here it goes...* He looked back at the others, nodding. He hoped they understood that they needed to be quiet. If they could kill some of them in their sleep, they wouldn't have to worry about receiving any injuries. Even though the medicine cats weren't trained as well as warriors, they could still fight back.

Attack! He launched himself onto the nearest cat; Ryeheart, digging his claws into the tabby's shoulders and lunging for his neck. The SkyClan cat immediately jerked awake, letting out a startled yowl and rolling over, throwing Bloodfur off of him.

Yowls and shrieks began rising from the waking medicine cats, and Bloodfur knew at once that it was stupid to think they could do this without any cat waking up. *Of course they'll wake up!* Only Mottledface seemed to have done it successfully. He caught sight of the tom pinning Otterpelt to the ground, pushing his chest fur against her muzzle. The reddish she-cat's struggles grew weaker and weaker before she went limp. Mottledface looked down at her triumphantly.

"What in StarClan's name-" Spicewhisker gasped before Papercut lunged for him, snapping at his throat. Spicewhisker shot back just in time, only to be tackled by Sunset. The orange tabby snarled as she swiped at his muzzle.

"Otterpelt!" Sagepaw shrieked, crouching over her mentor's body. "Get up!" She let out a wail of grief.

Silverberry spun to face Mottledface, her green eyes lit with fury. "Murderer!" She shrieked. "You're the same fleabags who killed

Starfaith, aren't you?" The tom laughed and the silver she-cat screeched, launching herself at him. Mottledface slashed at her shoulder and pushed her to the ground, and Papercut joined him. The two cats cornered her and started taking turns slashing their claws at her.

"Death to the clans!" Bonfire was screeching as he swiped his hind paws madly at Ryeheart's belly. "Death to the clans!"

Spicewhisker shrieked and swiped a paw at Sunset, knocking the she-cat onto her back. He leaped onto her and bit into her forepaw, and she yowled in pain. Bloodfur leaped to her aid, rolling the black and white medicine cat off of her and sinking his teeth into his neck. The small tom let out a shriek, and Bloodfur tasted blood on his tongue. He had no intentions of letting the ThunderClan medicine cat go. *See, easy as prey!*

"Get off him, mangy rogue!" Dewstorm barrelled into Bloodfur, knocking him away from the black and white cat. He slashed his claws at Bloodfur's ear, causing him to yowl in pain. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sagepaw, Ryeheart, and Spicewhisker struggling to fight off the rogues who were blocking the way out. Blood pooled heavily from Ryeheart's belly, but he didn't give up.

"Dewstorm!" Creampaw shrieked, lunging forward and biting Bloodfur's tail. He let out a screech, spinning around and swinging a paw at her, knocking her away.

"Go, Creamheart!" The medicine cat snarled as he glared at Bloodfur. Clearly he had given his apprentice her full name. "Now!"

"But-"

"Go!" As Dewstorm spoke, Bonfire leapt at him, pinning the medicine cat to the ground.

"Get him!" The black and orange tom snapped at Bloodfur.

Bloodfur raised an unsheathed paw, then hesitated, staring at Dewstorm. The gray tom's eyes were lit with defiance, but he could tell he was afraid. Suddenly, his heart hurt at the thought of taking

Dewstorm's life. *He always believed in me. He never treated me like the rest of the clan did.* He remembered how the medicine cat had been one of the few cats to encourage him when he'd become an apprentice.

"He's going to make a fine apprentice." Dewstorm had said. "And an even better warrior."

I can't kill Dewstorm! He doesn't deserve to die. He lowered his paw. "Let him go," He meowed in a lower tone than usual, praying to StarClan that Dewstorm wouldn't recognize his voice.

Bonfire's amber eyes flashed with surprise. He hesitated before nodding, leaping away, and Dewstorm glared at Bloodfur once before springing toward the tunnel, attacking one of the cats blocking the way.

"Ha! What's WindClan going to do without their old medicine cat?" Mottledface sneered.

Bloodfur turned, letting out a startled gasp. Mottledface and Papercut were still attacking Silverberry, even though it was clear the old she-cat couldn't fight back. A large pool of blood was spreading under her, the crimson liquid trickling from deep wounds in her belly and neck. The silver she-cat's pale green eyes were half closed and glazing. She wasn't going to survive this. But she was still clinging to life, breathing quick, ragged breaths. *Why don't they just finish her?* Bloodfur wondered, feeling sick to his stomach. *I can't watch this!*

"Run!" He heard Dewstorm shriek and turned to see him race out of the cave, Creamheart and Sagepaw on his tail. Ryeheart and Spicewhisker were struggling to hold off the cats by the entrance while they escaped.

While Mottledface and Papercut ran to help them with Ryeheart and Spicewhisker, Bloodfur raced over to Silverberry, his stomach twisting.

The elderly medicine cat's breath was slow, blood running from her mouth and the wounds on her body. Her glazed eyes flicked to

Bloodfur as she trembled. *I've got to put her out of her misery.* He thought and raised an unsheathed paw, slashing his claws across her throat. She choked out once, then fell silent, not moving. Bloodfur twitched his ear and stepped back, looking away. *I did the right thing... Didn't I? Of course I did...* He turned to see the others growling as they stood over the remaining cats.

[image]

Ryeheart was on the ground, one eye closed. Blood swelled from scratches across his eyelid. Blood soaked the ground beneath him. His stomach wound put him in critical condition. Beside him, Spicewhisker was half crouched, his legs trembling as he glared at the rogues, fear lighting his eyes. One of his ears was torn, and blood dripped from a wound in his shoulder. The small tom whimpered and slumped to the ground.

Papercut stepped toward them, but Bloodfur interfered. "Let's go," He snapped. "The others probably left to get help! If we stay any longer, we'll be outnumbered."

Mottledface licked blood from his muzzle and glared at Ryeheart and Spicewhisker. "What about them?"

"They're as good as dead." Bloodfur glanced back at the bodies of Otterpelt and Silverberry. "Let's go."

Papercut hesitated before nodding, and the group raced away, leaving the dead and wounded medicine cats behind them.

Chapter 23

[image]

"Something has to be done!"

"More cats will die!"

It was not a full moon. But the clans had decided to hold an emergency gathering after the moonstone attack two nights ago. The clans were yowling and speaking anxiously amongst themselves while the leaders stood on the great rock, having their own debates. Bloodfur strained to hear what they were saying.

"This is serious!" Ravenstar was snarling, his black fur fluffed up. "Ryeheart was nearly killed! Thank StarClan we got there on time!"

"And don't forget about Spicewhisker!" Strawberrystar's amber eyes flared. "He's still on the brink of joining StarClan!"

Frostedstar stared at the other leaders. "You should be grateful your medicine cats are alive! Otterpelt was killed."

"And Silverberry," Gladestar added, her eyes round. "Do you realize that we have no medicine cat now?"

The cats continued to speak to one another anxiously. Bloodfur felt a prickle of guilt as he stared at the medicine cats. *Why do you feel guilty? You shouldn't! Deserve is the one who told you to do it! If anyone should feel guilty, it's him! Besides, the only cat you killed was Silverberry, and she was suffering.*

Dewstorm and Creamheart sat below the great rock, looking uneasy. They'd been lucky. Both cats only had minor injuries. Sagefern sat near them, her eyes clouded with grief. Since Otterpelt had died, Frostedstar decided to give her full medicine cat name and make her the sole medicine cat of RiverClan. Ryeheart and

Spicewhisker couldn't attend the meeting, as their injuries were too critical.

"ShadowClan has been losing warriors for seasons now." Depthstar lashed his tail, and Bloodfur froze as the leader held his gaze briefly, then looked away. *Is he going to tell them ShadowClan suspects I'm involved?* He tensed. "And now the medicine cats have been attacked twice. Clearly there's a group of cats targeting us. This is not the work of a single cat." At those words, Bloodfur relaxed.

"So what are we going to do?" Strawberrystar demanded. "We cannot afford these casualties!"

"We have to attack!" Ravenstar growled. "We have to attack at once!"

Strawberrystar shot the SkyClan leader a glare. "And how do you suppose we do that, mouse brain? We have no idea who these cats are, or where they live!"

Depthstar turned his attention to the three medicine cats. "Do you know anything about those cats?" He pressed. "Any familiar scents? Names?"

Dewstorm shook his head. "They smelt like rogues to me. Two of them were covered in mud. I believe they were the same cats who attacked me and Starfaith all those moons ago."

"One of them kept yowling, 'Death to the clans'," Sagefern meowed anxiously.

The cats began to let out anxious yowls and cries.

"We're under attack!"

"These cats are evil!"

"Quiet!" Depthstar yowled, and the crowd slowly quieted into anxious murmuring. "There's nothing we can do until we learn more about these cats." He looked to the other leaders. "In the meantime, I suggest we double the number of cats on patrols."

"Yes," Frostedstar agreed. "And we should send two warriors with our medicine cat when they go to highstones." He blinked at the other leaders. "Once we know where these cats come from, we can attack. But for now, we must be on the defense." The other leaders murmured agreement.

"Wait," Gladestar twitched her tail. "WindClan still has a huge problem. We have no medicine cat."

The other leaders looked troubled. "There's no cat with any knowledge of herbs who can take on the job?" Ravenstar asked.

Gladestar shook her head, looking uneasy. "We have no one."

Below the great rock, Dewstorm rose to his paws. "Depthstar," He dipped his head. "If it's alright with you, I'd like to fill in as WindClan's medicine cat."

The ShadowClan leader looked at him in surprise, and Dewstorm quickly went on. "It wouldn't be permanent. I could stay for a season or so until I've trained a new medicine cat for them."

"Dewstorm?" Creamheart stared at her mentor wide eyed. "Y-you're leaving me? I can't handle the clan on my own! W-what if I forget something, or make a mistake?"

The medicine cat rested his tail around her. "You won't, Creamheart," He promised. "You're a fine medicine cat. I know I'm leaving ShadowClan in good paws."

Gladestar stared at the gray tom. "You would really leave your clan for so long for us?"

"Of course." Dewstorm hesitated for a long moment. "I have a confession to make." He leaped onto the great rock with the other leaders, and Strawberrystar let out an irritated growl. Bloodfur blinked up at the tom curiously. *What's he going to say?* The other leaders looked just as interested as the medicine cat drew in a deep breath.

"Many seasons ago, me and Starfaith became close friends," He meowed. "We started sneaking away at night to see each other,

and..." He hesitated. "We were in love."

There were several shocked gasps from the cats below. "That's against the warrior code!" Crowmask bristled.

"You're a traitor!" Revengeheart hissed.

Dewstorm glared at the black legged tom. "I'm not a traitor! Me and Starfaith loved each other, but we never would have betrayed our clans! We wanted nothing more than to be the best medicine cats we could!" He paused, his tail drooping. "But she might still be alive if I hadn't suggested we stay behind that night at highstones for a while. She sacrificed her life for mine and led Depthstar to me." He turned to Gladestar, who looked stunned. "Gladestar, I owe a great deal to Starfaith, and WindClan. I would be honored to serve as your medicine cat, and train one to take my place."

No cat spoke for a moment. Bloodfur now understood why Dewstorm had been so upset over Starfaith's death. *When we found him, the first thing he asked was if she was okay... Will I ever feel that way for any cat?*

Gladestar dipped her head. "Thank you, Dewstorm. You may join WindClan and train a medicine cat for us." She paused. "If Depthstar agrees."

The ShadowClan leader nodded. "Yes. Creamheart is a fine medicine cat, and we can spare Dewstorm."

Frostedstar dipped his head. "Then the gathering is over. If any cat hears anything about these rogues, send word immediately. We cannot risk another clan losing its medicine cat." He sighed, looking down at Sagefern. "Thank StarClan Otterpelt had an apprentice."

***

"I can't believe I have an apprentice!" Revengeheart hissed as he swiped a paw at his mate. He, Mistybreeze, Bloodfur, Mottledface, Blackstorm, and Foxshadow were practicing battle moves early that morning. The sun hadn't risen yet.

Bloodfur grunted as Blackstorm pushed him over, swiping his claws

at his ear. He quickly dodged the black tom's paw and pushed him onto his side. He was satisfied with how quickly his skills were improving. Poisonedsap had suggested they practice at least once a day. The final battle was nearing. Across from him, Mottledface and Foxshadow were swiping at each other.

Revengeheart lunged at Mistybreeze, but she dodged his attack, her tail lashing. "How dare that stupid fleabag give me an apprentice?" He demanded as he slashed his claws at her shoulder and she gasped, staggering back. "I don't need a dumb apprentice!" He raised his paws and pushed her, and she fell onto her side. "Ebonypaw is weak!" *She just left the nursery. What do you expect?* Bloodfur thought as he dodged Blackstorm's attack.

"She's not worth my time!" Revengeheart rested a front paw on Mistybreeze's flank, digging his claws into her, and she whimpered before pulling away, starting to stand. "Apprentices are a waste of time!" He swiped his claws at her ear, and she cried out.

Bloodfur paused and looked at her, bristling. He was startled to see a bit of blood trickling through her silver fur, and dripping from her ear. *She's hurt!* He didn't think Revengeheart meant it. But he was thinking about his apprentice, and it was clearly causing him to take out his anger on her.

Blackstorm leaped at Bloodfur, but he pushed him away and raced to Revengeheart, who was about to swipe at Mistybreeze. He quickly pushed between the two cats. "How about we go hunting now?" He suggested, hoping that he would agree.

Revengeheart hesitated before nodding. "Good idea." He glanced at the sky. "Cobratail's going to send out a patrol soon. We don't want to be caught." To Bloodfur's relief, he moved away from Mistybreeze. "Let's go."

Bloodfur looked at Mistybreeze as she sat up, licking a forepaw and swiping it over her bleeding ear. *She should go see Creamheart.*

"Let's team up," Revengeheart meowed. "Foxshadow, you and Blackstorm should go together."

Bloodfur hesitated. *I want to make sure Mistybreeze is okay...* "How about me and Mistybreeze-"

Revengeheart shot him a glare. "No. She stays with me." He lashed his tail. "You can go with Mottledface." He turned away, shouldering her onward. "Let's go."

"Okay." His ears flattened. *I hope she's okay.* Mistybreeze glanced back at Bloodfur, blinking at him gratefully before following Revengeheart.

Allegiance Update #5

Shadowclan

Leader: Depthstar - Very dark blue-gray tom with a lighter front left paw, dark blue eyes.

Deputy: Cobratail - Mottled dark red and black tabby tom with amber eyes.

Medicine Cat: Creamheart - Brown and cream tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

Warriors

Crowmask - Black tom with amber eyes.

Ashcloud - Dark gray and white tom with pale green eyes.

Apprentice, Foxpaw

Cougarfoot - Golden brown tom with a white muzzle, black ear tips and tail tip, amber eyes.

Cliffshade - Dark brown and gray tom with a white underbelly, yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Heatpaw

Greenpine - Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Flameheart - Ginger tabby tom with green eyes.

Bloomfire - Orange she-cat with white paws, muzzle, and chin, dark ginger ears.

Copperstripe - Dark golden ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Apprentice, Applepaw

Timberstorm - Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Cardinalpaw

Blackstorm - Black tom with yellow eyes.

Foxshadow - Black and very dark ginger tom with a bushy tail, dark amber eyes.

Stripednose - Tortoiseshell tom with white paws, chest, and muzzle, black mark on his nose, blue eyes.

Mottledface - Mottled brown tom with amber eyes.

Boost - Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. Former loner.

Song - White she-cat with light blue eyes. Former loner.

Revengeheart- Battle scarred white tom with jet black legs, yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Ebonypaw

Swiftstalker- Black and white tom with blue eyes.

Apprentice, Flintpaw

Bloodfur- Dark reddish brown tabby tom with a nick in his right ear, yellow eyes.

Mistybreeze - Silver-gray she-cat with darker points, light blue eyes.

Coldpebble - Dark gray tom with darker points, dark blue eyes.

Tinylark - Small brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes.

Honeyrose - Golden-red and cream tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Spiderfang - Black and dark gray tom with dark amber eyes.

Amberrose- Orange and gold she-cat with amber eyes.

Falconclaw- Dark ginger tabby tom with black tufted ears, amber eyes.

Apprentices

Cardinalpaw - Reddish orange tabby tom with green eyes.

Heatpaw - Dark ginger and white tom with yellow eyes.

Foxpaw - Orange and white she-cat with black legs and ears, a fluffy white tipped tail, green eyes.

Applepaw - Yellow tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Ebonypaw - Dark brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Flintpaw - Orange tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Queens

Poisonedsap - Dark golden brown she-cat with dark brown muzzle, throat, nose blaze, black chin, ears, paws, and tail tip, amber eyes. Expecting Cougarfoot's kits.

Elders

Buzzardglare- Dark brown tabby tom with one blind eye, yellow eyes.

Bluerain - Light blue gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes.

_____

Thunderclan

Leader: Strawberrystar - Speckled reddish-ginger and cream she-cat with amber eyes.

Deputy: Snowfalcon - Broad shouldered white tom with amber

eyes.

Medicine Cat: Spicewhisker - Small black tom with a white muzzle, tail tip, and front right paw, yellow eyes.

Warriors

Broadwing - Broad shouldered dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Oaktuft - Brown and cream tabby tom with amber eyes.

Morningmist - Light gray tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Chillwhisker - Light gray tabby tom with light blue eyes.

Cedarnose - Dark brown tabby tom with a white splashed muzzle and paws, amber eyes.

Vanillafern - Creamy colored tabby she-cat with pale yellow eyes.

Battalon - Smoky black tom with gray-brown muzzle and underbelly, amber eyes.

Darkoak- Very dark brown tom with swirled black stripes, amber eyes.

Windclan

Leader: Gladestar - Light golden yellow tabby she-cat with pale greenish yellow eyes.

Deputy: Monarchwing - Orange she-cat with black spots and ear tips, golden yellow muzzle, chin, nose blaze, chest, and tail tip, darker orange paws, yellowish green eyes.

Medicine Cat: Dewstorm - Spotted gray tom with yellow eyes.

Warriors

Firetail - Orange tom with a darker reddish tail and ears, amber

eyes.

Jaggedear - Brown tabby tom with a torn left ear, green eyes.

Driftrunner - Dark golden brown tom with very thick black classic tabby stripes, muzzle, chin, ears, paws, chest, and underbelly, amber eyes.

Willowtail- Light gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

Whitehare - White tom with light green eyes.

Tornadowind - Dark gray tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Queens

Clovernose - Brown and white she-cat with green eyes.

Riverclan

Leader: Frostedstar - White tom with pale blue eyes.

Deputy: Ravenfeather - Black tom with amber eyes.

Medicine Cat: Sagefern - Silver and black tabby she-cat with pale blue-green eyes.

Warriors

Frozenripple - Long furred silver tom with swirled white stripes, pale blue eyes.

Lemonsplash - White tom with yellow patches, yellow eyes.

Pebblestep - Mottled gray tom with white paws, pale green eyes.

Petalfin - Silver, black, dark gray, and white splashed she-cat with blue eyes.

Skyclan

Leader: Ravenstar - Long furred black tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Sandblaze - Light golden yellow tom with light brown-ginger paws, mark on chest, ears, chin, and yellowish blaze on forehead and tail tip. Yellow eyes.

Medicine Cat: Ryeheart - Brown tabby tom with dark brown tabby legs, tail, ears, and nose blaze, creamy chin, muzzle, chest, and tail tip, amber eyes.

Warriors

Tigerleap - Dark golden brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Brackenleaf - Dark ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Deserve's Army

Leader: Deserve - Black tom with white paws, emerald green eyes.

Healers

Shimmer - Silver spotted tabby she-cat, pale amber eyes.

Coco - Dark brown tabby she-cat, green eyes.

Soldiers

Castiel - Silver tabby tom with light blue eyes.

Crow - Black tom with a white front left paw, amber eyes.

Papercut - Thin white tom with a scar down the center of his face, pale yellow eyes.

Wolf - Very thick furred dark brown-gray tom with a white muzzle, yellow eyes.

Bonfire - Fiery ginger tom with black patches, amber eyes.

Sunset - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Sorrel - Orange tabby she-cat with darker ginger ears and tail, pale green eyes.

Timber - Brown tabby tom with a torn ear, green eyes.

Patch - White tom with brown patches, blue eyes.

Coke - Black tom with dark gray spotted legs, dark blue eyes.

Screech - Black tom with amber eyes.

Queens

Ivy - Dark brown tabby she-cat with white patches, green eyes. Mother to Wolf's kits:

Talon - Dark gray-brown tom, yellow eyes.

Snowflake - silver she-cat with white spots, pale blue eyes.

Misty - Dark gray tabby she-cat, pale green eyes.

Chapter 24

[image]

Bloodfur awoke that night to fur brushing past him. He picked up Bloomfire's scent and stiffened. *I don't want her anywhere near me!* When she passed, he opened his eyes, not lifting his chin from his paws. He kept as still as possible.

He saw that Bloomfire had left the warriors den, headed for the dirtplace. He watched her disappear into the bushes, suppressing a growl as anger surged through him. He slowly rose to his paws and crept out of the den, keeping his pawsteps as quiet as possible. He glanced around briefly. No other cats were awake except for the guards by the thorn tunnel. But they were on the outside of the camp. They wouldn't see him.

He crouched outside the dirtplace, his eyes fixed on the entrance. He slowly unsheathed his claws, waiting for the orange and white she-cat to emerge. *I'll make it fast... Then she'll be dead... she'll pay for her lies... And so will Flameheart...* He didn't even think of the consequences. The hatred inside him overpowered any sense of reason. *Maybe I can catch her inside...* He started forward.

"Bloodfur?"

He nearly jumped out of his fur at the quiet meow behind him. He spun, claws unsheathed and fur bristling, ready to attack whoever had caught him stalking Bloomfire.

Mistybreeze stood, blinking away sleep as she studied him. "What are you doing?"

He hesitated, his pelt prickling with unease. Did she suspect he was going to kill Bloomfire? Would she tell the clan? "I-I..." His mind spun. "I was... waiting to go to the dirtplace."

"Oh." She looked closely at him, and Bloodfur swallowed nervously. *She'll never believe that!* She hesitated. "Well, when you're done,

would you like to go for a walk in the forest?"

He was surprised at her request. "Uh, sure." He glanced back at the dirtplace, suddenly urgent to get out of camp before Bloomfire saw him. "Let's go."

Mistybreeze frowned. "I thought you had to go..."

"Uh-no, not anymore," Bloodfur stammered. "You scared it right out of me." He quickly swiped his hind claws across the ground behind him.

She rolled her eyes. "Toms." She headed for the thorn tunnel, and Bloodfur followed, casting a quick glance over his shoulder at the dirtplace.

***

It was quiet for a while. The pine trees stood tall under the moonlight, and the scents of the forest clung to the air. Bloodfur padded alongside the silver she-cat through the trees. No cat spoke. He wondered why Mistybreeze wanted to walk with him. He suspected it had something to do with their plot with Deserve. After what felt like moons, Mistybreeze spoke. "Do you really want to kill your parents?" She didn't look at him.

Bloodfur glanced at her, twitching his tail in irritation. "My parents are dead."

"I mean Flameheart and Bloomfire."

"They aren't my parents," He growled.

Mistybreeze twitched her ear. "Aren't they? They raised you."

He didn't respond, beginning to wish he hadn't agreed to go out for a walk with her. *I didn't come here to be pestered about Flameheart and Bloomfire! I hate talking about them! I wish they didn't exist!*

"My father never paid much attention to me and Coldpebble," Mistybreeze meowed quietly as they walked. "And Diamondrain only spoke to us a few times after we were made apprentices. You're

so lucky to have had Flameheart and Bloomfire as parents. They stuck with you the whole way. My-"

"Can we talk about something else?" Bloodfur was unable to hold back a growl. "Like, maybe how to get rid of the other medicine cats?"

Mistybreeze didn't speak for a moment. "Dewstorm is my uncle," She commented.

Good for you. Bloodfur couldn't help but feel angry with her for bringing him out here just to bother him about his foster parents. He decided not to tell her that he had no intentions of killing Dewstorm, one of the few cats who had treated him well.

When he didn't respond, Mistybreeze looked away, seeming uncomfortable. Bloodfur began to feel awkward. *Fox dung... I can't ruin my friendship with her* again! He glanced around, spotting a pine tree ideal for climbing. The trunk was thick and rugged, providing plenty of places for a cat to place their paws. "I'll race you to the top of that tree," He suggested uncertainly.

Mistybreeze blinked at him, looking surprised. "What? Why?"

"For fun." He flicked her shoulder with his tail before sprinting at the tree, leaping at it and digging his claws into the bark. He prayed Mistybreeze was following and he wasn't making a fool of himself. But he heard her jump up behind him, and the two cats clawed their way up the tree. He pulled himself onto a branch, blinking in surprise when the silver she-cat flashed past him. "You're slow," She purred, pausing on a branch above him.

"Oh, yeah?" Bloodfur leaped up onto the next branch, and Mistybreeze spun, jumping to another branch. He couldn't believe how quickly she moved, and without hesitation. Bloodfur was constantly watching where he put his paws and judging whether a branch was too far to jump. By the time he got to the top, Mistybreeze was sitting comfortably on a branch.

"You took your time." Her blue eyes gleamed at him.

Bloodfur snorted, wanting to nudge her for that, but he didn't out of worry she'd fall. "Yeah, well, I was being careful," He chuckled. "You must be part squirrel."

The silver she-cat let out a purr of amusement. "Then you must be part turtle."

He gaped at her, his tail curling in amusement. "Take that back!"

"Never!" She purred. The two of them sat up there for a while, joking and laughing together. They teased each other about climbing and talked about funny things that had happened in the past. "Remember the time Swiftstalker ran headfirst into a tree?"

Bloodfur broke out laughing. "No! When was that?"

"When he was an apprentice," Mistybreeze chuckled. "He was chasing after a frog with that crazy speed he has. He was going so fast, he couldn't dodge the tree on time."

"I wish I'd seen that!" He laughed. A purr rumbled in is throat, and he realized that in this moment, he felt happier than he'd felt in moons. He'd almost forgotten what it felt like. He did have fun sometimes with Revengeheart and the others, but this was different. It felt better.

When their laughter died down, Mistybreeze's expression turned serious. "I'm sorry I brought up Flameheart and Bloomfire. I was just trying to help."

"I know. It's okay." He hesitated. "Nothing will help though. I'd rather talk like they don't exist. They lied to me."

"But they did it for you," She commented quietly. When Bloodfur didn't respond, she shifted closer to him and rubbed her head against his shoulder. He was startled for a moment, then relaxed, letting out a purr.

"We should do this again sometime," He hesitantly suggested.

"That would be nice," Mistybreeze responded, and Bloodfur purred loudly. *Maybe this is the first real friend I'll have...*

[image]

Chapter 25

[image]

Bloodfur padded into the shadowy forest with his companions. The sky was a dark lavender, the sun hiding beyond the horizon. The grass was damp and speckled with dew. Revengeheart had brought a large number of them out for a training session. Looking at all of the cats with them, Bloodfur realized just how many of his clanmates were involved with Poisonedsap and Deserve's plot.

Swiftstalker, Mistybreeze, and Blackstorm were close to Revengeheart. Not far from them, Foxshadow and Mottledface chuckled together. Spiderfang, Amberrose, and Falconclaw followed them, chatting loudly. Cougarfoot was walking near Bloodfur.

Poisonedsap had wanted to join them, but Cougarfoot had insisted she stay in the nursery with their newborn kits: Gingerkit, Duskkit, Leafkit, and Rowankit. They had been born just a few days ago, the morning after Bloodfur and Mistybreeze had walked together in the forest.

"Alright," Revengeheart meowed when they reached a clearing, turning to the group. "Let's partner up." He studied the group. "Mottledface, you go with Spiderfang. Foxshadow, you and Amberrose..."

Amberrose purred and nuzzled the dark furred warrior before they padded away. *They'll be mates soon.* Bloodfur realized.

Revengeheart turned to his brother. "Swiftstalker, you can go with Falconclaw. Cougarfoot, go with them." When the three walked away, he continued. "And I'll team up with Blackstorm," He decided, flashing Mistybreeze a glare. "Since Mistybreeze is such a bad fighter."

The other cats broke into amused laughter, and Mistybreeze looked down, her tail drooping. Bloodfur lashed his tail, anger prickling through him. *How dare he?* "I guess that leaves me and

Mistybreeze," He meowed, hoping Revengeheart would agree to that.

To his relief, the black legged tom nodded. "Alright."

Bloodfur turned away to find a place where they could practice, and Mistybreeze followed. Once they were out of the others views, she fell in beside him, looking downward. He wasn't sure if it was his place to ask, but after some thought, he decided to do it. "Why does Revengeheart treat you so badly?" He asked quietly.

The silver she-cat didn't respond right away, seeming incredibly hesitant. She let out a sigh. "He's mad because I won't have kits," She admitted, startling Bloodfur. "He's been pressuring me about it for moons. I don't know why he's so insistent about it."

Bloodfur twitched his tail, feeling anger boiling inside him. *How could Revengeheart do that? That's not right!* He remembered how Poisonedsap had pressured Cougarfoot into having more kits and he began wondering if there was a connection between the two cats urgencies to have kits. *I know Spiderfang, Amberrose, and Falconclaw were brought into our group pretty much the moment they were made apprentices... Was that Poisonedsap's plan all along? Is Revengeheart thinking the same way?* "Do you want kits?" He asked.

Mistybreeze hesitated thoughtfully. "Maybe," She muttered. "But not his."

"Then why are you mates?" He asked, confused.

She sighed. "I don't know. He seemed like a different cat at the time. I had no idea what I was getting into, like this whole alliance with Deserve to attack the clans. I want no part in this!"

Bloodfur was surprised to hear this. *Doesn't she see how terrible the clans treat some of us? Doesn't she see what we're fighting for?* But he realized that he had too much respect for Mistybreeze to hold this against her. He was willing to support whatever she believed. "Why don't you leave?"

"I don't think I can," She sounded troubled. "They won't let me,

and... I think I know too much."

His fur prickled with unease. "They wouldn't kill you."

"I wouldn't put it past that group of fox hearts." She suddenly stopped in her tracks, looking at Bloodfur sharply as though she just remembered he was one of them. Fear flashed in her eyes. *She said too much.* He realized as he turned to her. *She never intended to tell me all of that.* "Please don't tell Revengeheart any of that!" She begged anxiously. "Or anyone else!"

He felt uneasy at the thought of hiding something from Revengeheart. The tom had a lot of cats behind him. If any cat knew Bloodfur was keeping secrets from him... It wouldn't end well. However, he couldn't bring himself to tell on Mistybreeze. He would feel horrible if anything happened to her.

Mistybreeze saw that he was hesitating, her blue eyes filled with panic. "Please, Bloodfur!"

"I won't," He assured, but she still looked uncertain. "I promise, I won't tell any cat. You can trust me."

"I thought so." Her fur slowly flattened as she relaxed. "Thanks."

They continued walking until they reached a small clearing. The sun was beginning to rise, causing the dew on the grass to glisten. "Okay," He hesitantly faced her, suddenly unsure about this. He'd never battle trained with a she-cat before. And the fact that it was Mistybreeze made him more hesitant. "How about we keep our claws sheathed?"

Mistybreeze twitched her tail hesitantly. "Revengeheart wouldn't like that."

"Revengeheart isn't here," He reminded her.

She hesitated before nodding. "Okay, let's start." She crouched and stared at him, preparing for his attack, but Bloodfur didn't move. "Well?"

"You can start," He meowed. *I don't want to attack her!*

"Okay." Mistybreeze launched herself at him, and he was surprised at her strength as she barrelled into him and rolled him to the ground. Bloodfur hesitated before gently batting her shoulder with a sheathed paw. She barely moved and leaped away from him, blinking. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Bloodfur tensed. *Come on, she's going to think you're weak!* He sprang at her and pushed her onto her side with his front paws. He raised a paw, but Mistybreeze was quicker. A hard silver paw batted his head, and he ducked to avoid her next swing, stepping back.

She leaped to her paws, looking amused. "For StarClan's sake, Bloodfur! I'm not a delicate kit!" Her tail twitched. "Treat me like a real enemy!"

I will! Bloodfur swung a paw at her only to slow at the last minute, weakening the blow to her forehead. Mistybreeze let out a low growl and sprang at him, pinning him onto his back.

"Come on, fight properly!" She exclaimed, looking irritated.

Bloodfur tried to free himself, but found that he couldn't. *She's really strong for being such a thin, light cat!* "I can't." He admitted.

"Why?" She growled, her ears flattening. "Do you think I'm weak too?"

"No!" He insisted. "You're great at fighting, I just don't want to accidentally hurt you. You're my friend, and such a kind, beautiful cat..." He trailed off, growing hot with embarrassment. *Why did I say that??* He dared to meet Mistybreeze gaze, seeing surprise lighting her eyes. After a moment she let out a purr, looking touched.

"You know, you're not like any of those other cats, Bloodfur." She leaned down and rubbed her muzzle alongside his, and he purred loudly.

"What's going on?"

They sprang apart at Revengeheart's snarl. They turned to see the

white tom standing at the edge of the clearing, his eyes lit with anger.

"We were training," Mistybreeze meowed uneasily.

"It didn't look like *training* to me," Revengeheart's tail lashed furiously. "You already have a mate: *me!"* He shouldered her aside, then approached Bloodfur, who flattened his ears anxiously. "You'd better back off, or I'll rip your pelt off!" He snarled. "Got it?"

Bloodfur nodded, his fur bristling with fear. He'd never seen Revengeheart this angry, and he wasn't going to wait and see if his threat was literal. "Of course." He lowered his head. "Sorry."

Revengeheart's amber eyes burned into Bloodfur's and he swallowed nervously. After a moment, the tom spun around, nudging Mistybreeze forward. "Let's go." He cast Bloodfur one last glare before they left.

Bloodfur stared after them, his tail lashing slowly. *I'm starting to think Revengeheart isn't a friend after all... And I hate him now that I know how he treats Mistybreeze!*

Chapter 26

[image]

Bloodfur padded through the forest, a cool breeze stroking his fur as he moved. He was surrounded by his allies, cats from all five clans. He smelt the air. They were nearing Deserve's camp. When they reached the entrance, they were greeted by Papercut and Bonfire, who stepped aside to let them in.

When they entered the camp, Bloodfur saw many familiar faces. Sunset, the she-cat who had helped them in the attack at highstones was sitting near a den, speaking with Castiel. The healers of the group, Shimmer and Coco, were outside of their den, helping a young tom with a thorn in his paw.

"Greetings," Deserve padded over to them, his eyes glinting like emeralds in the night. "I hear the attack went well?"

Poisonedsap dipped her head. "Yes, Deserve." As she spoke, Castiel quickly joined his father, standing alongside him.

Bloodfur was still surprised that the she-cat had joined them. Her kits were less than a moon old, but she had insisted on leaving them to attend the meeting. She had asked Song, who had just moved into the nursery, to keep an eye on them. The young she-cat had asked many questions, none of which Poisonedsap answered. But eventually Song had agreed to watch the kits.

"Otterpelt and Silverberry are dead." Revengeheart told the rogue leader.

"Yes," Poisonedsap agreed, looking to Bloodfur and letting out a purr. "Bloodfur led the attack well. I'd say we were successful."

Bloodfur dipped his head, surprised to have gotten any praise from the stubborn she-cat. He noticed Revengeheart glare at him, lashing his tail. *He's still mad about catching me and Mistybreeze in that*

moment. But he felt no need to try to resolve the tension between them. *I can't say I'm too happy with you either.*

Deserve looked at him and gave an approving nod, looking pleased. "Well done, Bloodfur." A low purr rumbled in his throat. "I knew I could trust you."

He felt a rush of pride at Deserve's praise. "It was my pleasure," He purred.

"Well," Revengeheart twitched his ear. "I wouldn't call it a success. Only two medicine cats were killed. Dewstorm, Creamheart, Spicewhisker, Sagefern, and Ryeheart are still alive."

"But Spicewhisker isn't well." Battalon flicked his black tail. "Sagefern has been coming by to check on him, and she says he might not pull through."

Deserve's eyes narrowed. "Good. But the remainder must be eliminated." He looked thoughtful for a moment, then looked at Bloodfur. "ShadowClan has two medicine cats at the moment, right?"

"One," Bloodfur meowed. "Dewstorm has left to fill in as WindClan's medicine cat."

"Now we have Creamheart." Mottledface paused before adding. "Brownstripe's daughter."

The black tom's tail twitched at the mention of the cat he had despised. "Really?" He growled. "All the more reason to kill her. ShadowClan must have no medicine cat. Bloodfur, will you do the job?"

Bloodfur hesitated. *Kill my own medicine cat..?* His stomach twisted. *She's so young!* He glanced up at the star speckled sky, beginning to wonder if the warriors of StarClan were really watching him. *They told me "Only the spilling of blood will save ShadowClan. Revenge will guide you."* He was spilling blood. His desire for revenge was guiding him. So surely that meant he was doing the right thing? Perhaps StarClan *wanted* the medicine cats dead for some reason.

Maybe Creamheart had to die for him to fulfill StarClan's prophecy.

"Of course, Deserve," Bloodfur meowed, meeting the tom's gaze. "I'll take care of it tomorrow." He noticed Mistybreeze looking at him out of the corner of his eye, but he ignored her. *She doesn't agree with any of this, and that's fine. But she should accept that I do.*

"Good." Deserve dipped his head. "I shall call a meeting to discuss our next course of action." He turned away and leaped onto the tree stump where he called meetings. Castiel quickly followed, sitting beside his father and curling his silver tail around his paws.

"All cats gather for a meeting!" The leader yowled, and his soldiers assembled around the tree stump, looking up at him with interest. When everyone was there, he began speaking. "I believe the time is near for us to launch our attack on the clans," He meowed. "The clans have lost two medicine cats, and two others are unlikely to recover. Without medicine cats, the injured cannot be treated." He looked at his son.

"Papercut and I have led attacks on the clans for moons now," Castiel meowed. "I believe we have been successful in lowering their numbers." He paused, studying the cats below. "Our army is nearly as big as two clans put together. In addition, we have our clan cat allies." He nodded to Bloodfur and the others before turning to his father. "Deserve, I believe we're capable of attacking at any time."

The black tom looked thoughtful. "I agree..." He looked at the clan cats for a long moment before speaking again. "However, I believe we should wait until some of the other medicine cats are taken care of. Bloodfur will kill Creamheart tomorrow."

"And I could try for Sagefern," Ravenfeather offered.

Poisonedsap twitched her tail. "Good idea. And I'd like to hold off the attack until my newest kits have sharpened their skills. They will be participating in the battle."

Bloodfur blinked. *Your kits are less than a moon old! Surely you're not showing them battle moves already?* But remembering how she'd

trained Revengeheart and Swiftstalker as kits, he wasn't too surprised. But the idea of the kits fighting in the battle troubled him. *They're no match for any cat!*

Mistybreeze stood, staring at Poisonedsap in shock. "Surely you're not sending your kits into battle? They're too young!"

The golden she-cat narrowed her eyes at her. "No cat is too young to fight."

"That's not true," The silver she-cat objected, fur bristling. "Those kits are sure to be killed if you-"

"Mistybreeze," Revengeheart cut her off, narrowing his yellow eyes. "I don't think a cat who won't have kits has any place in deciding what another mother should do with them," He growled. "You're no use here, so why don't you go catch me a mouse?"

The silver she-cat's blue eyes lit with defiance before they faded to sadness. She turned away, her tail drooping as she left the camp.

Bloodfur stared after her before looking to Revengeheart, his fur prickling with anger. *How dare that arrogant piece of fox dung...!* He hardly heard anything Deserve said for the rest of the meeting, he was so angry. When the meeting was over, Revengeheart stretched out before leaving the camp to make dirt. Bloodfur narrowed his eyes and waited until he was out of sight before he followed him.

He kept his pawsteps light as he followed the white tom through the trees. He paused in some ferns as Revengeheart stopped in a clearing ahead of him, starting to scrape the earth with his paws. Bloodfur stepped out and approached him, resisting from leaping at him. "Revengeheart."

He bristled in surprise and straightened, shooting Bloodfur a glare. "Hey! Can't a guy make dirt in peace?"

Bloodfur had nothing else to say to the tom, so he cut straight to it. "You should treat Mistybreeze better."

The black-legged tom narrowed his eyes. "What?"

"Are you deaf?" Bloodfur lashed his tail. "I said you should treat Mistybreeze better."

Revengeheart glared at him. "I treat her fine."

"No, you don't." He growled. "She's a great cat, and all you do is treat her like dung. Why don't you start acting like a mate instead of a bully?"

A growl rumbled in the tom's throat. "I think you're just jealous," He lashed his tail. "Because I have Mistybreeze, and you don't. You'll never have anybody."

Bloodfur bristled. "I'm not jealous!" *I just want Mistybreeze to be happy!*

"Then what's your problem?" Revengeheart snapped.

"My problem is the way you treat Mistybreeze, in case you've forgotten." Bloodfur growled, stepping closer to him until their muzzles were close. He was unable to contain the frustration burning inside him. "You're an arrogant, rude piece of fox dung who doesn't even deserve a mate."

Revengeheart held Bloodfur's gaze with burning eyes, a growl rumbling in his throat. "I'll do whatever I want with Mistybreeze, and you can't stop me, *Bloodkit*."

With a hiss of fury, Bloodfur unsheathed his claws and lunged forward, sinking his teeth into Revengeheart's shoulder and throwing him to the ground. The tom yowled and swung a hefty black paw at him, dragging his claws across his shoulder before pushing him away. Bloodfur rolled before leaping to his paws, launching himself at Revengeheart again. The white tom raised his paws to shield himself, but not quick enough. Bloodfur slashed his claws across his face, and Revengeheart shrieked as he fell onto his back. Bloodfur leaped onto him, but the tom kicked him hard in the stomach.

Bloodfur fell onto his side, feeling the air knocked out of him. He started to his paws, gasping for air, but Revengeheart lunged at him

before he could recover, pinning him onto his back. He froze as the hefty tom sank his teeth into his throat and pulled him upward.

Bloodfur pressed his paws against Revengeheart's chest in an attempt to free himself, his shoulders just brushing the grass beneath him. A terrible pain was growing in his throat as Revengeheart grasped it in his teeth. He felt blood running down his neck and grew dizzy with terror. *He's going to kill me! I'm going to die!*

But just as Bloodfur grew certain of his fate, Revengeheart released him and his head hit the ground with a thud. As he coughed a bit of blood, the tom turned away, his fur bristling with fury.

"Mind your own business, and stay away from my mate!" Revengeheart spat, blood shining on his white muzzle. His tail lashed angrily. "Or next time, I won't let go." He spun and walked away.

Bloodfur slowly stood up, feeling dizzy. Blood stained the grass below him, and he felt his throat nervously before lowering his paw to study it. His pads were soaked in blood. *It's bad.* He thought. *But I don't think I'll die. Thank StarClan Deserve has healers...* He began limping back to camp, feeling a rush of anger. *I hate Revengeheart more than any cat now... Why did I ever think he was a friend? He's willing to kill me.*

Chapter 27

[image]

Morning light rested upon the forest. The sun hid behind the clouds that blotted across the pale blue sky. An occasional cool breeze drifted through the camp. Cobratail stood beside the meeting rock, sending out patrols.

"Cougarfoot, will you lead a patrol to renew the scent markers by the WindClan border?" The deputy was meowing. "And Greenpine, you can lead a hunting patrol. The fresh kill pile is running low."

By the nursery, Poisonedsap was laying in the grass, watching her four tiny kits stumble around. Their eyes weren't open yet.

"There's so many smells!" Gingerkit squeaked, lifting his tiny pink nose to the air.

His sister, Leafkit, stumbled into him, her striped tail high in the air. "I can't wait to see it all!"

"And the sooner your eyes open, the sooner you can start learning to be warriors," Poisonedsap purred.

The sooner they'll be killed in battle, you mean. Bloodfur lay in the shadows of the thorn barrier, watching the cats he had once called his clanmates. His chin rested in his paws. Tail twitching. Now, they were just the cats who had hurt him. Lied to him. Betrayed him. The cats who were going to lose their medicine cat today. *They'll feel like they've lost everything. Just like I did.*

He saw a cream colored pelt out of the corner of his eye and snapped his attention to the medicine den. Creamheart had emerged, her blue eyes shining. Cardinalpaw padded up to her, purring a greeting, and the two cats bumped heads before she said something to him and padded over to Cobratail.

"It's a nice morning, isn't it?" She commented, her tail high in the

air.

The red and black tom purred. "It certainly is. Green leaf has been good to us."

"I'm going to collect some comfrey root for Crowmask," Creamheart meowed. "He wrenched a claw yesterday. Will you send word if anyone needs me?"

Good for Crowmask. Bloodfur thought, feeling a prickle of hatred at the mention of the tom who had nearly attacked him.

"Of course." Cobratail nodded, and the medicine cat headed for the thorn tunnel.

Bloodfur watched her disappear into the thorn tunnel, not moving a muscle. He waited until he was sure the she-cat was far ahead before rising to his paws and heading out the thorn tunnel. He looked around, seeing no sign of her. *Fox dung! Where'd she go?* He lowered his head and sniffed the ground, quickly picking up Creamheart's scent. He quickly continued through the forest. He was so focused on her scent trail, he didn't realize how close he was to Greenpine's patrol until he heard their voices.

"Wow!"

"Good catch, Ashcloud!"

He stopped in his tracks, spotting Greenpine's brown tabby pelt between some bushes up ahead. *That was close!* He quickly backed away. *I'll have to go around them...* He carefully circled around the patrol and caught Creamheart's scent further up ahead. He continued through the forest until he saw her. He peered out from behind the bushes.

The cream and brown she-cat was crouched beside some comfrey flowers, digging up earth around the base with her front paws. She carefully bit the stem and pulled the flowers from the disturbed soil, exposing the black roots she'd come for.

Bloodfur lowered himself into a hunting crouch and began stalking closer to her. He paused, his stomach twisting with anxiety. *Oh,*

StarClan, can I really do this? It's my own medicine cat! And Creamheart was born long after I was. None of this has anything to do with her! Can I really kill such a young, innocent cat with her whole life ahead of her? He began to consider backing out. *Maybe I don't have to do this... Maybe I can be honest with Deserve and...* He shut his eyes. *No. He'll be angry with me if I don't. All of them will. They might even kill me!*

He drew in a deep breath, opening his eyes and staring at Creamheart as she dug at another patch of comfrey. *I'm sorry, Creamheart. I'll kill you quickly.* He slowly crept out of the bushes, his eyes fixed on her back.

SNAP

Bloodfur froze as he felt a twig snap under his paw. *Oh no!* The medicine cat's ears flicked up in surprise. She spun, and her eyes flashed with alarm the moment she saw Bloodfur. She immediately bolted away, and his heart burst with terror. *Fox dung! She's going to go back and tell the clan I was stalking her!* He instantly gave chase, springing to his paws and sprinting after Creamheart. *I can't lose her*! He thought anxiously as he ran after her, dodging bushes and trees as his paws drummed madly at the ground. *She saw me! If she tells the clan, everyone will know what I'm up to! It might even ruin Deserve's plan!*

Creamheart veered sharply, racing between two trees, and Bloodfur shot after her, his heart sprinting as he breathed heavily, the air cold in his lungs as he tired. *Please stop!* He silently begged. *Please!* The cream she-cat leaped over a fallen tree only to catch a hind paw on it. She gasped as she rolled to the ground on the other side.

Thank StarClan! Bloodfur cleared the tree and landed on all fours in front of her, breathing heavily. His legs trembled under him. He didn't know if it was due to exhaustion or fear. He forced them forward, moving toward her. Creamheart staggered to her paws, her eyes wide as she backed up against a tree, her tail tucking between her legs.

"I'm sorry," Bloodfur rasped, unsheathing his claws.

It was obvious that she was afraid. But defiance flared in her blue eyes. "The clan was right about you," She growled shakily. Her words sent his fur bristling in anger. *Maybe you* do *deserve this.* He let out a growl and lunged at her, claws outstretched.

He nearly reached her when a reddish blur leaped in the path of his claws. He felt them tear open the cat's throat before he could stop. The cat fell to the ground as Bloodfur stumbled awkwardly to the ground. He stared at the reddish orange tabby laying before him.

No..!

Cardinalpaw lay on his side, his flank rising and falling unevenly as he breathed weakly. Blood ran heavily from the wound in his throat, soaking the grass under him in blood.

"Cardinalpaw!" Creamheart shrieked.

For a heartbeat, Bloodfur was frozen, staring at him in shock and disbelief. His paws were warm and sticky with blood. *No...! No! What have I done?!* "Cardinalpaw!" He choked out and staggered close, crouching beside him. "No, no...!" He pressed his paws against Cardinalpaw's throat, desperately trying to stop the bleeding. "No, please!" He looked up at Creamheart, who had crouched behind the wounded apprentice, staring at him with pain filled eyes.

"You're a medicine cat!" Bloodfur snapped shakily. "Save him!"

"It's too late." Her voice cracked as she spoke. She licked Cardinalpaw's head.

Bloodfur felt his heart shatter into a million pieces. "No," He whimpered and shouldered Creamheart aside, curling himself around the small red tabby. He curled his tail around him and pressed his muzzle into his cheek fur. "Cardinalpaw, please!" He cried desperately. "No, no, please!"

[image]

The apprentices green eyes flickered open. "B-Bloodfur..." He rasped, blood running down his chin as he spoke in a small voice. "Why..?"

"I'm sorry!" He sobbed and began rasping his tongue over Cardinalpaw's ear. He still had a bit of kitten fluff around them. *He's too young to die! He can't die! Not like this!* He paused and pressed his face into his red fur. "I'm so sorry! Cardinalpaw, please..!"

Cardinalpaw's breathing was slowing down. "I-I love y-you, Cream-h-heart..." He croaked out, his eyes closing.

The medicine cat rested her chin on his head, her ears flat with grief. "I know." She rasped.

Bloodfur rested his chin on Cardinalpaw's shoulder, his heart throbbing as he felt the apprentice go still. He waited desperately for his flank to move again. For him to breath. But it never came. A lump in his throat grew as he faced this horrible fact. *Cardinalpaw is dead... And I'm the one who killed him...*

He waited for Creamheart to say something to him. Attack him. Something. But neither cat moved for a while. After some time passed, Bloodfur drew in a shaky breath, slowly standing. "Let's take him back to camp," He rasped. He felt sick as he licked the blood from his paws. Cardinalpaw's blood.

Creamheart slowly lifted her head from Cardinalpaw's, giving a tiny nod. She gently lifted the dead apprentice by his scruff and pulled him onto Bloodfur's shoulders. He wanted to collapse, and not because of the weight of the apprentice. His heart felt as though the moonstone was resting inside of it, dragging it down until it broke through. *I killed Cardinalpaw...*

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No cat spoke the whole way back to camp. When they neared the thorn tunnel, Bloodfur swallowed a lump in his throat. He dreaded the thought of facing the clan. Facing Flameheart and Bloomfire... Heatpaw, Foxpaw, and Applepaw... But he had to do it. He had to face whatever awaited him in the clearing. When they entered the camp, they were greeted by yowls and cries of horror.

"Cardinalpaw!" Tinylark gasped.

Blackstorm and Mottledface looked startled. "What happened?"

"I'll bet it was Bloodfur," Cliffshade spat, his fur bristling.

"Murderer!" Crowmask snarled.

They're right this time. Bloodfur's heart throbbed as he continued to the center of the clearing, Creamheart by his side. He gently lowered Cardinalpaw to the ground. He felt his heart ache with regret as he remembered what he'd said to Cardinalpaw all those moons ago when the apprentice had said he still loved Bloodfur like a brother. *"Well, you have no reason to. I don't love you."* He wished he could take back those words. "I love you, Cardinalpaw," He whimpered, licking his ear. "You're my brother." His voice died into a cry.

"Cardinalpaw!"

His heart skipped a beat at Bloomfire's voice. He quickly backed away. She and Flameheart shot across the clearing to the apprentice's body, looking horrified. The orange and white she-cat pressed her muzzle into Cardinalpaw's fur, letting out a long wail of grief. Flameheart dropped into a crouch, letting out a low cry as he rested his chin on his son's head. Their other kits joined them, letting out wails of grief. Bloodfur stepped back and lowered his head, shame burning through him. He couldn't look at them. *I'm sorry!* He wanted to wail. *I'm so sorry!*

"What happened?" Timberstorm demanded, and he realized that most of the clan had gathered around them and Cardinalpaw.

"Who did this?" Bloomfire cried. "Who did this to my poor kit?"

Crowmask rose to his paws, glaring around. "We all know who did this!" His amber eyes flashed to Bloodfur. "The same cat who murdered all our other clanmates!"

Flameheart raised his head from Cardinalpaw's body, his green eyes lit with anger. "Enough of that nonsense!" He spat. "Bloodfur is not a murderer!"

"Yeah!" Heatpaw yowled. "You're all crazy!"

"You're awfully quick to accuse Bloodfur," Applepaw glared at Crowmask. "Maybe it was you!"

The black tom bristled. "I was here the whole time, mouse-brain!"

Bloodfur hung his head in shame, his heart breaking. *I killed him... I killed Cardinalpaw!*

"Enough!" Depthstar yowled, and every cat turned to the clan leader as he wove through the crowd toward them. "Bloodfur? Creamheart?" He stepped toward them, his blue eyes lit with sadness. "What happened? Who did this?"

Creamheart glared at Bloodfur and opened her jaws to speak. "It was-"

"Me." Bloodfur meowed, keeping his eyes on the ground, unable to face the cats around him. "It was me."

He flinched as the clan erupted around him. Some cats gasped in shock, while others began yowling and snarling in fury. *What have I done?* He silently wailed. *What have I done?*

"Murderer!" Crowmask screeched. "I knew it all along!"

"I never thought..." Song stared at him.

"No," Bloomfire choked, her green eyes lit with horror as she stared at the cat she'd raised as her own. "Bloodfur, no... It's not true!" She cried. "Oh, Bloodfur, how could you?"

"I'm sorry-" He began in a cry.

Heatpaw rose to his paws, his amber eyes lit with anger. "We looked up to you!" His voice shook. Beside him, Flameheart stared at Bloodfur in shock.

"I knew you hated us," Applepaw wailed. "But I didn't think you would *kill* one of us!"

Bloodfur's heart tore apart. "I don't hate you!" He started toward them only to be pushed back by Cobratail and Crowmask. He stared

at the two warriors desperately. "I didn't mean it!" He cried. "I never meant to kill him!"

"No, you meant to kill *me!"* Creamheart bristled, glaring at him. "And you would have, but Cardinalpaw jumped in the way!"

More yowls of fury roared around him. Bloodfur looked at the deputy who had always supported him. "Cobratail, I didn't-"

"Enough, Bloodfur," The deputy growled, his amber eyes blazing with anger. "You've betrayed us all. You tried to kill our medicine cat!"

"Hawkfeather was right!" Crowmask yowled.

Ashcloud raised his voice. "The kit born in blood tried to destroy our clan!"

"I'm sorry!" Bloodfur yowled desperately. "I swear, I'm sorry! I didn't want this!" His head spun. "Please, you-"

"Silence!" Depthstar snarled, and both Bloodfur and the clan quieted. Only low growls rumbled throughout the clearing. The dark tom's eyes narrowed to slits as he faced Bloodfur. "You have betrayed ShadowClan, Bloodfur," He growled. "What you've done is unforgivable. I exile you from ShadowClan. If any cat catches you on our territory, they have my permission to kill you."

Bloodfur's heart felt as though it had been pierced by a thousand thorns. I've been exiled..! He thought he hated the clan. But now, he was desperate to stay. This was the only home he'd ever known. "But-"

"Leave!" Depthstar spat furiously. "Or I'll kill you myself!"

Cats growled around him, seeming ready to attack Bloodfur if he refused. "I really am sorry." He whispered, but no cat answered him. He saw Bloomfire turn away. Flameheart lowered his head, and their other kits turned their attention to their fallen littermate. He hung his head and turned away, his tail drooping.

As he moved through the crowd, cats started hissing insults at him,

some even pushing him. He padded through the thorn tunnel and continued through the forest blindly.

He had no idea where he was going. The ache in his heart was unbearable. The shame he felt was even worse. He remembered taking Cardinalpaw out on his first day as an apprentice. He'd been afraid of the thunderpath, and Bloodfur had promised to always protect him. *I'll always be there.* Bloodfur had told him. *I'll never let anything hurt you. But I did.* He let out a cry of grief, pausing and hanging his head. *And it was* me!

"Bloodfur..." He heard Mistybreeze pad to his side, but he didn't move. "I'm so sorry." She sat down and leaned against him. "It was an accident." She meowed quietly. "You were trying to kill Creamheart."

"I shouldn't have been trying to kill anyone." Bloodfur murmured. *What's wrong with me? What was I thinking?* He moved away from her. "I have to leave."

"Where will you go?" She asked.

Bloodfur looked at his paws. "I don't know," He mumbled. "I guess I'm a rogue now. I'll find some place to go." He started padding away slowly. "Goodbye, Mistybreeze."

Mistybreeze stared after him sadly. "Goodbye..."

Chapter 28

[image]

For several days Bloodfur had wandered outside of clan territory, hunting for himself, finding shelter for the night, then moving on in search of a place he could call home. But no place made him feel happy or secure. He constantly felt vulnerable to other rogues, foxes, badgers, twolegs... He was used to living with a group of cats. He concluded that rogue life was not for him.

So one moon ago, he had turned to the only other place he knew. Deserve's Army. He had expected Deserve to be angry with him after hearing he'd failed to kill Creamheart. But instead, the leader had understood that Cardinalpaw's death had interfered with the plan. Deserve had welcomed Bloodfur into the army. The other soldiers were nothing like his clanmates. But at least he was surrounded by other cats. It made him feel more comfortable.

He lay near the soldiers den, curled up in a ball with his tail over his nose. Since Cardinalpaw's death, something inside him had changed. He no longer felt anger, or the hunger for revenge that had burned so strongly inside him for so long. He could still feel his claws ripping open Cardinalpaw's throat. And Silverberry's throat... How he'd prepared to kill Bloomfire and Creamheart... The looks on their faces... *What happened to me?* He wondered. *How could I have been so willing to kill? I'm a monster... A murderer... Just like the clan always said... Hawkfeather was right... I tried to destroy the clan.*

"Bloodfur."

He twitched an ear at Castiel's voice, but didn't get up. Not every cat liked having Bloodfur there. Some felt that he was weak for being so upset over the death of a clan cat, while others thought he was a waste of space for laying around all the time. And it was true. Bloodfur had contributed little to nothing to the army since he arrived. He was still heartbroken over Cardinalpaw and dealing with a lot of inner conflict. Castiel seemed to be the only cat who understood that.

"Come on, get up. I brought you a mouse."

"I'm not hungry," Bloodfur mumbled, though his stomach growled at the scent of prey. He'd gotten very thin. For the past moon, he'd been keen on starving himself. Castiel managed to convince him to eat just enough every few days to keep him alive.

Castiel snorted. "Sure you're not." He nudged the mouse closer to Bloodfur's muzzle. He felt his mouth water at the scent. "You have to eat. Stop doing this to yourself."

"Fine," He muttered and shifted into a crouch, hesitating before taking a small bite from the mouse. The more he ate, the more hungry he got, and he took quicker, larger bites until only bones remained. He swiped his tongue over his muzzle. "Thanks," He meowed quietly. "You've treated me better than anyone else here."

"I wouldn't let any cat starve." The silver tabby twitched his tail. "I was going to patrol the territory. Want to come?"

Bloodfur hesitated. He hadn't set paw outside the camp since he got here. But he did feel like going out and stretching his legs would be a good idea. "Sure."

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The two cats padded through the forest quietly. Bloodfur looked at the trees around him with a pang of homesickness. "There are a lot more pine trees in ShadowClan territory."

"Are there?" Castiel meowed as he sniffed a rock.

"Yes." He paused. "I climbed one once when I was an apprentice. It was the only time I managed to impress Brownstripe." It was quiet for a while.

"So this Cardinalpaw..." Castiel paused, glancing back at him. "What was so special about him?"

Bloodfur's heart ached as he thought of him. "He was Flameheart and Bloomfire's son- the cats who raised me." He quickly added. "We believed we were brothers for a long time before we found out

the truth." He looked down. "He loved and looked up to me. And I promised to always be there for him."

Castiel sat down. "And were you?"

"No." Bloodfur looked away. "After I found out he wasn't my brother, I turned my back on him. I told him I didn't love him." He shut his eyes. "I wish I could take it all back. I wish I could apologize to Flameheart and Bloomfire."

The silver tabby studied him. "Revengeheart told me you hated them."

Bloodfur hesitated, feeling conflict churn through him again. "I don't know anymore," He confessed. "I hated them, and I was willing to kill them. But now..." He sighed. "But they lied to me..."

"Were they good parents to you?" Castiel asked as they continued through the forest.

He remembered all the times Bloomfire had comforted and praised him, and how Flameheart had always been ready to defend him and give him advice. *I trusted them with my life... I loved them, and they loved me like I was their own.* "Yes." He murmured. "They were."

Castiel frowned. "Then why were you ever angry with them? You had two parents who loved and cared for you, despite what the rest of the clan thought. They stood by your side for everything." He hesitated. "I didn't even know my mother. She died giving birth to me and my littermates. Her name was Nebel."

[image]

"I'm sorry." Bloodfur blinked at him. "You have littermates? I thought you were Deserve's only kit."

The tabby snorted. "He sure makes it seem that way! I had five other siblings. They all died right after they were born, except for Crow."

Bloodfur recalled seeing the black tom around camp. "I had no idea he was your brother."

"My father favors me." Castiel meowed. "He says I'm smarter and stronger. I've asked him to try to give more attention to Crow, but he doesn't seem to want to listen." He paused. "Anyway, it seems that Flameheart and Bloomfire wouldn't have lied to you unless they cared about you."

He looked down thoughtfully as he padded alongside Castiel. "They told me they didn't want me to feel abandoned. They thought the truth would hurt too much."

"Would you rather have known about your real parents from the start?" Castiel asked.

Bloodfur wasn't sure how to respond. He was amazed when he realized he'd never thought about that. Only how angry he was with his foster parents for keeping the secret from him. "I faced so much criticism from the clan when I was a kit... I think knowing my real parents were dead would have made my life even harder."

Neither cat spoke for a while as they renewed scent markers along the border. Bloodfur was deep in thought as they went. *I think Flameheart and Bloomfire might have made the right decision by lying to me... They were the best parents I could have asked for...*

***

When they returned to camp, Bloodfur was surprised to pick up ShadowClan scent. He spotted Revengeheart standing before Deserve, speaking with him. Swiftstalker, Mistybreeze, and Blackstorm were with him. Bloodfur didn't want anything to do with Revengeheart or Blackstorm, but he longed to speak to Swiftstalker and Mistybreeze. When Revengeheart went to speak with Deserve in his den, Bloodfur hesitantly approached the others, aware of Castiel following.

Mistybreeze looked at him, her blue eyes flashing with surprise. "Bloodfur!" She padded up to him and bumped her head against his, purring a greeting. "What are you doing here?"

Bloodfur purred for the first time in moons. "I couldn't live as a rogue," He admitted. "I had to stay in a group, and Deserve

welcomed me." He looked past her at Swiftstalker. "How is the clan?"

"They're well," Swiftstalker hesitated. "Bloomfire's kits have become warriors."

Bloodfur let out a purr. "That's great! What are their names?"

"Heatstorm, Foxflower, and Applefall," The black and white tom responded.

"Those are great names." His heart sunk. *Cardinalpaw should have been with them...* "I miss them."

Mistybreeze stared at him sadly. "Why are you here?" She asked quietly. "You should be with the clan."

He shook his head. "No," He rasped. "I'm a soldier now."

"No, you're not," Mistybreeze insisted. "You're a warrior of ShadowClan!"

Bloodfur looked down. "They exiled me, and they all think I'm a horrible cat."

"Do you think everything you've done since Revengeheart recruited you is making them think differently?" Mistybreeze demanded. "You've been doing a lot of terrible things. But you were just blinded by anger and grief, and Revengeheart brought out the worst in you. You're a good cat, Bloodfur. You just need to show the clan that."

Bloodfur didn't respond. *How can I? I've been exiled. They'll kill me if I return!* He deliberately changed the subject. "Why are you here?"

Just then, both cats emerged from the den and approached the others. "Very well," Deserve was saying to the white tom. "I'll send a patrol tonight."

Swiftstalker was staring at his brother nervously. "What did you do?"

The tom's amber eyes gleamed. "I found a solution to getting rid of our apprentices."

"What?" Swiftstalker's eyes widened. "B-but Flintpaw and Ebonypaw could be useful to us! We could recruit them and-"

Revengeheart glared at him. "Don't be ridiculous!" He spat. "Those apprentices are a waste of our time, and they're weak!" He lashed his tail. "The sooner they're dead, the better." As he spoke, Deserve turned to his soldiers.

"Castiel, you can lead the patrol to the burnt sycamore just across the thunderpath. Revengeheart has arranged for the apprentices to be there tonight for a training session."

"Yes, Deserve." Castiel turned to the other cats. "Papercut, Bonfire, Patch, come with me." He looked at Revengeheart. "Lead the way."

Bloodfur watched as Castiel led his cats out of the camp. Mistybreeze looked back at Bloodfur once before following. His heart sunk. *They're going to kill those apprentices... How could I ever have agreed with these cats?*

Allegiance Update #6 + Family Tree

Shadowclan

Leader: Depthstar - Very dark blue-gray tom with a lighter front left paw, dark blue eyes.

Deputy: Cobratail - Mottled dark red and black tabby tom with amber eyes.

Medicine Cat: Creamheart - Brown and cream tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

Warriors

Crowmask - Black tom with amber eyes.

Ashcloud - Dark gray and white tom with pale green eyes.

Cougarfoot - Golden brown tom with a white muzzle, black ear tips and tail tip, amber eyes.

Cliffshade - Dark brown and gray tom with a white underbelly, yellow eyes.

Greenpine - Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Flameheart - Ginger tabby tom with green eyes.

Bloomfire - Orange she-cat with white paws, muzzle, and chin, dark ginger ears.

Copperstripe - Dark golden ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Timberstorm - Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Blackstorm - Black tom with yellow eyes.

Foxshadow - Black and very dark ginger tom with a bushy tail, dark amber eyes.

Stripednose - Tortoiseshell tom with white paws, chest, and muzzle, black mark on his nose, blue eyes.

Mottledface - Mottled brown tom with amber eyes.

Boost - Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. Former loner.

Song - White she-cat with light blue eyes. Former loner.

Revengeheart- Battle scarred white tom with jet black legs, yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Ebonypaw

Swiftstalker- Black and white tom with blue eyes.

Apprentice, Flintpaw

Mistybreeze - Silver-gray she-cat with darker points, light blue eyes.

Coldpebble - Dark gray tom with darker points, dark blue eyes.

Tinylark - Small brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes.

Honeyrose - Golden-red and cream tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Spiderfang - Black and dark gray tom with dark amber eyes.

Amberrose- Orange and gold she-cat with amber eyes.

Falconclaw- Dark ginger tabby tom with black tufted ears, amber eyes.

Heatstorm - Dark ginger and white tom with yellow eyes.

Foxflower - Orange and white she-cat with black legs and ears, a fluffy white tipped tail, green eyes.

Applefall - Yellow tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentices

Ebonypaw - Dark brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Flintpaw - Orange tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Queens

Poisonedsap - Dark golden brown she-cat with dark brown muzzle, throat, nose blaze, black chin, ears, paws, and tail tip, amber eyes. Mother to Cougarfoot's kits:

Gingerkit - Ginger and white tom with green eyes.

Duskkit- Brown and caramel colored tom with black tufted ears, amber eyes.

Leafkit - Brown tabby she-cat.

Rowankit - Golden tabby she-cat.

Elders

Buzzardglare- Dark brown tabby tom with one blind eye, yellow eyes.

Bluerain - Light blue gray speckled she-cat with blue eyes.

_____

Thunderclan

Leader: Strawberrystar - Speckled reddish-ginger and cream she-cat with amber eyes.

Deputy: Snowfalcon - Broad shouldered white tom with amber eyes.

Medicine Cat: Spicewhisker - Small black tom with a white muzzle, tail tip, and front right paw, yellow eyes.

Warriors

Broadwing - Broad shouldered dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Oaktuft - Brown and cream tabby tom with amber eyes.

Morningmist - Light gray tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Chillwhisker - Light gray tabby tom with light blue eyes.

Cedarnose - Dark brown tabby tom with a white splashed muzzle and paws, amber eyes.

Vanillafern - Creamy colored tabby she-cat with pale yellow eyes.

Battalon - Smoky black tom with gray-brown muzzle and underbelly, amber eyes.

Darkoak- Very dark brown tom with swirled black stripes, amber eyes.

Windclan

Leader: Gladestar - Light golden yellow tabby she-cat with pale greenish yellow eyes.

Deputy: Monarchwing - Orange she-cat with black spots and ear tips, golden yellow muzzle, chin, nose blaze, chest, and tail tip, darker orange paws, yellowish green eyes.

Medicine Cat: Dewstorm - Spotted gray tom with yellow eyes.

Warriors

Firetail - Orange tom with a darker reddish tail and ears, amber eyes.

Jaggedear - Brown tabby tom with a torn left ear, green eyes.

Driftrunner - Dark golden brown tom with very thick black classic

tabby stripes, muzzle, chin, ears, paws, chest, and underbelly, amber eyes.

Willowtail- Light gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

Whitehare - White tom with light green eyes.

Tornadowind - Dark gray tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Queens

Clovernose - Brown and white she-cat with green eyes.

Riverclan

Leader: Frostedstar - White tom with pale blue eyes.

Deputy: Ravenfeather - Black tom with amber eyes.

Medicine Cat: Sagefern - Silver and black tabby she-cat with pale blue-green eyes.

Warriors

Frozenripple - Long furred silver tom with swirled white stripes, pale blue eyes.

Lemonsplash - White tom with yellow patches, yellow eyes.

Pebblestep - Mottled gray tom with white paws, pale green eyes.

Petalfin - Silver, black, dark gray, and white splashed she-cat with blue eyes.

Skyclan

Leader: Ravenstar - Long furred black tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Sandblaze - Light golden yellow tom with light brown-

ginger paws, mark on chest, ears, chin, and yellowish blaze on forehead and tail tip. Yellow eyes.

Medicine Cat: Ryeheart - Brown tabby tom with dark brown tabby legs, tail, ears, and nose blaze, creamy chin, muzzle, chest, and tail tip, amber eyes.

Warriors

Tigerleap - Dark golden brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Brackenleaf - Dark ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Deserve's Army

Leader: Deserve - Black tom with white paws, emerald green eyes.

Healers

Shimmer - Silver spotted tabby she-cat, pale amber eyes.

Coco - Dark brown tabby she-cat, green eyes.

Soldiers

Castiel - Silver tabby tom with light blue eyes.

Crow - Black tom with a white front left paw, amber eyes.

Papercut - Thin white tom with a scar down the center of his face, pale yellow eyes.

Wolf - Very thick furred dark brown-gray tom with a white muzzle, yellow eyes.

Bonfire - Fiery ginger tom with black patches, amber eyes.

Sunset - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Sorrel - Orange tabby she-cat with darker ginger ears and tail, pale green eyes.

Timber - Brown tabby tom with a torn ear, green eyes.

Patch - White tom with brown patches, blue eyes.

Coke - Black tom with dark gray spotted legs, dark blue eyes.

Screech - Black tom with amber eyes.

Bloodfur- Dark reddish brown tabby tom with a nick in his right ear, yellow eyes.

Queens

Ivy - Dark brown tabby she-cat with white patches, green eyes. Mother to Wolf's kits:

Talon - Dark gray-brown tom, yellow eyes.

Snowflake - silver she-cat with white spots, pale blue eyes.

Misty - Dark gray tabby she-cat, pale green eyes.

[image]

Chapter 29

[image]

The sun had begun setting, casting long dark shadows across the clearing like stripes on a tabby. Bloodfur lay half concealed in one of these stripes, watching the cats in the camp.

"Look at me, Ivy!" A little dark gray-brown tom exclaimed as he pounced on his sister. "I'm going to be the best soldier in the army!"

The gray tabby kit squeaked and thrust her brother away, batting a tiny paw at his ear. "Not before me!"

Ivy let out a purr as she watched her kits play fight. "You're all going to make fantastic soldiers."

A purr rumbled in Bloodfur's throat. I was like that when I was a kit. *I wanted to be the best warrior in ShadowClan!* He felt a pang of sadness. *But you don't always get what you want. You make mistakes... Horrible mistakes...*

"Good evening." Castiel approached and Bloodfur sat up as the silver tabby settled beside him.

He dipped his head. "Hi, Castiel." As he spoke, some cats started laughing near the soldiers den, and he glanced at them.

Bonfire was sitting with Papercut and Patch, his amber eyes gleaming. "Did you see how shocked those apprentices were?" He purred.

"Yeah!" Papercut replied. "We showed those dumb clan cats!"

When will they shut up about that? Sadness flooded over Bloodfur. He'd been horrified when Castiel's patrol had returned early that morning and delivered the news. The apprentices had been brutally outnumbered and unprepared. Papercut and Castiel had killed Flintpaw with ease. Ebonypaw had climbed to the top of the burnt

sycamore in attempt to get away, but was forced to jump off when Bonfire and Patch cornered her. She'd fallen on her shoulder, apparently too injured to get up. Castiel and Papercut had slashed open her stomach just before a ShadowClan patrol arrived, and they fled the scene. He knew these details only because the soldiers had been bragging about it all day.

He felt so sorry for the apprentices. Flintpaw had been too young to die, like Cardinalpaw. He could only pray that Ebonypaw would pull through. Papercut had claimed blood was *pouring* out of her stomach *everywhere*, but Bloodfur thought it was possible that the cruel tom was exaggerating. He remembered the looks of agonizing grief on Flameheart and Bloomfire's faces when they saw Cardinalpaw's body.

Cliffshade was horrible to me. Bloodfur thought. *But he doesn't deserve to lose his kits. No cat deserves to lose kin...* He wished he could go to ShadowClan to see how Ebonypaw was doing. He turned to Castiel. "Were Ebonypaw's injuries really that bad?" He asked.

The silver tabby twitched his ear. "Papercut's always twisting his stories to sound dangerous. Yes, it was bad, but I can tell you there wasn't blood pouring *everywhere."* He narrowed his ice blue eyes. "I hope that apprentice is dead."

"I hope not," Bloodfur muttered.

Castiel flashed him a look. "What?"

He tensed, having almost forgotten that Castiel was just as cruel as the others and highly respected in the army. He'd begun thinking of him as a friend who he could speak freely with. But he couldn't let Castiel know he was having second thoughts about his actions. "I mean-"

"No." The silver tabby narrowed his eyes. "Bloodfur, I think you need to decide where your loyalty lies. You've talked to me about ShadowClan a lot. The trees, the cats, the memories. Almost as though you miss it there."

Bloodfur's pelt prickled with unease. "I-I'm loyal to Deserve's Army

now."

Castiel snorted. "Don't give me that load of mouse dung. I can tell you want to be with your clan." He flicked his tail. "I don't like being lied to. Tell me the truth. Now." His voice hardened.

He let out a sigh. "Fine. I do want to go back to ShadowClan," He confessed. "I made a huge mistake by letting Revengeheart drag me into this. I should never have listened to him." He hung his head. "A lot of cats treated me badly growing up, but there were also cats who were good to me, like Dewstorm, Cobratail, Flameheart and Bloomfire, who were the best parents I could have asked for." His heart ached. "They raised me and loved me as their own, and I can't thank them enough. I regret everything wrong I've said and done. I'm not a murderer. I don't like hurting other cats. I just want to go home and tell everyone how sorry I am!"

Castiel was quiet for a long moment. Bloodfur's stomach churned. "Please don't tell Deserve," He begged. "He'll kill me."

"I won't tell any cat." Castiel turned away and Bloodfur stared after him uncertainly. After a moment, the tabby paused, glancing over his shoulder. "I'm fighting for what I believe in. I think it's time you did the same."

He thought about this as Castiel walked away. *He's right... I belong in ShadowClan...* He dug his claws into the ground. *I want to go home! I have to help my clan! I have to hunt and fight for them. I have to get out of here!* He suddenly caught the scent of ShadowClan, and a moment later the leaves by the entrance rustled.

Revengeheart pushed through the leaves, followed by the other clan allies. Every cat but Poisonedsap seemed to be there, as she was with her kits. Bloodfur's spirits lifted at the sight of Mistybreeze. The silver she-cat was padding behind Revengeheart, looking nervous. She looked behind her at two other cats who Bloodfur was surprised to see.

Stripednose and Song were among the group, flanked by the other cats. Bloodfur was even more confused as he wondered why she would travel all this way when she was expecting kits. She looked a

little wary, but much calmer than Stripednose, who looked ready to attack someone. *What in StarClan's name are they doing here?*

"Deserve!" Revengeheart called as he led the others into the clearing. "There are some cats here who want to speak with you."

The black tom stepped out of his den. The moment he saw Song, his green eyes lit with surprise. "Song?" He padded toward them. "I haven't seen you since..." He trailed off, and for the first time, Bloodfur thought he saw warmth in his eyes. "You're expecting kits. That's great! How's Boost?"

The white she-cat hesitated. "He's well."

It was quiet for a moment. Deserve narrowed his eyes at Stripednose. "Who is this?" The tortoiseshell tom glared at him, his tail lashing.

Song shifted closer to him. "This is Stripednose, my mate."

"You took a clan cat as your mate?" The leader twitched his tail. "After all they've done?"

Song glared at her brother. "Enough of that!" She hissed suddenly. "Don't think I don't know your cats have been attacking us. I would never forget the scent of my brother. What do you have against the clans? They took us in!"

"No, they hurt us!" Deserve retorted. "Have you forgotten what Snakekit and his littermates did to us? We were just kits!"

"Snakekit was just a kit, too!" Song shot back. "And you killed him."

The black tom bristled angrily. "I did it for you and Boost!" He spat. "I wanted to protect you!"

"Well, you didn't!" Song growled. "You just made the clan suspicious of us for moons and left us knowing that our brother was a murderer!" For a moment, the siblings faced each other, tails lashing in anger. Bloodfur wondered if they would attack each other. But Song's eyes suddenly softened. "Come on, Deserve," She murmured. "I know you don't really want to hurt anyone. I just

want my brother back. The one who played with us in the barn and wanted the best for us... Remember that? Please don't hurt anyone. This isn't you."

Deserve looked thoughtful for a long moment, and Bloodfur wondered if he was actually considering her words. But then Deserve's eyes narrowed. "I will not stop until the forest runs with the blood of clan cats. The clans will be destroyed, one cat at a time..." His eyes flashed to Blackstorm. "Starting with him."

The black tom's eyes widened. "What-"

Bloodfur bristled in shock as Papercut and Bonfire bounded forward and sank their teeth into Blackstorm's pelt, dragging him over to Deserve as he yowled. The two cats dropped him at his paws and the army leader pushed him onto his back, planting a white paw on his chest. He raised an unsheathed paw, and Bloodfur shut his eyes, flinching as he heard Blackstorm's screech of agony.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw Deserve standing over Blackstorm, his paw soaked in blood. The black tom lay motionless on his back, his yellow eyes round and sightless. Blood pulsed from a horrible wound in his throat. No cat spoke, though not many looked very alarmed. Only Stripednose, Song, Mistybreeze, Spiderfang, and Swiftstalker stared at the body in horror.

"Why did you kill him..?" Spiderfang gasped. "He was loyal to you!"

Deserve glared down at Blackstorm's body through gleaming emerald slits. "*I* was never loyal to *him."* He kicked the black tom roughly with a hind paw. "He's with his rotten littermates now. He's the first of many cats who will feel my claws before the battle." He narrowed his eyes. "Warriors, apprentices, kits... And you can't stop me, Song."

Stripednose suddenly let out a furious yowl and Bloodfur froze as the tom launched himself at Deserve. But the army leader easily wrestled Stripednose to the ground, pressing a white paw to his throat and digging his claws into him.

"No!" Song's eyes lit with panic. "Let him go!"

Deserve glared down at the tortoiseshell tom, a low growl rumbling in his throat. Bloodfur watched, his fur prickling with fear. *Deserve is worse than I thought! He can't kill Stripednose! He can't kill any more cats!* He stepped forward, wondering if he should interfere.

But the black tom suddenly released the warrior, glancing at his sister. "I care about my family, believe it or not." He growled. "I won't take your mate from you. You're my sister." He glanced at Papercut and Bonfire. "Take them to the extra den," He ordered. "They know too much about us and cannot be allowed to return to their clan."

"What?" Song exclaimed, and Bloodfur watched in shock as the two cats were herded into a den, and two soldiers guarded the entrance.

"Cats of Deserve's Army!" The black tom leapt onto his tree stump, looking down at his soldiers. "The time has never been more right! We will attack the clans tonight under a full moon while they are gathered at fourtrees!"

Bloodfur froze. *What?!*

"Half of us will launch an attack at fourtrees," Deserve snarled, his eyes blazing with anger. "Smaller groups will be sent to each camp. Most of the cats will be at fourtrees, so picking off the few cats in the camps will be easy." He dragged his gaze across the crowd. "Tonight, we will have vengeance on the clans who have wronged us. Fight for everything they have ever taken from you! Fight like you've never fought before!"

The cats below let out yowls of excitement. "Let's do it!" Bonfire yowled, leaping to his paws.

"Kill the clan cats!" Papercut purred. "Every last warrior!"

Castiel raised his voice above the others, leaping to his father's side. "Death to the clans! Death to the clans!" The other cats immediately joined in the chant until Bloodfur's ears burned from the sound.

I have to get out of here... He slowly backed away, his eyes wide. *I have to do something! I have to warn them!* He spun and bolted into

the forest, his heart pounding heavily. I can't let any more cats suffer because of Poisonedsap and Deserve's plot! He crashed through some bushes and froze when he found himself facing two cats on the other side. Swiftstalker and Mistybreeze spun to face him, their fur bristling in shock. When they recognized Bloodfur, they relaxed a little.

"Bloodfur!" The silver she-cat let out a sigh. "I thought you were one of Deserve's cats!"

Swiftstalker narrowed his eyes at him uncertainly. "He *is."*

"No!" Bloodfur meowed, feeling a rush of determination. "I'm a clan cat through and through. There's no way I'm standing by while innocent cats are killed." He looked from Swiftstalker to Mistybreeze. "What are you two doing here"

Swiftstalker hesitated, glancing at Mistybreeze. "Can we trust him?"

"It's Bloodfur." Her blue eyes glowed as she gazed at him. "Of course we can."

The black and white tom hesitated. "You're right," He agreed. "Okay." He glanced around to make sure no one was spying on them. "We need to do something to stop the attack." He meowed. "Deserve will destroy the clans."

"Wait..." Bloodfur studied him. "I thought you were on his side? You've been plotting with them since you were apprenticed!"

Swiftstalker looked down. "Not voluntarily."

He stared at him. "What do you mean?"

The black and white tom was hesitant for a moment. "When I was a kit, I witnessed Poisonedsap killing my father, Maplefur."

"What?" Bloodfur's fur bristled in shock. "Why would she..." His mind spun as he remembered how Maplefur objected to Poisonedsap teaching their kits battle moves, forcing them to fight so violently. *Of course... She thought Maplefur would get in the way. He would never have let his kits go down this path...* "Why didn't you

tell anyone?" He exclaimed. "We all thought ThunderClan did it! There was a battle! Cats died!"

"I couldn't!" Swiftstalker shot back. "She threatened to kill every cat in the nursery! You, Mistybreeze, Coldpebble, the queens! Everyone." He sighed. "And after seeing all the allies she had, she could have done it." He paused. "Deserve wanted her to recruit as many clan cats as possible. Poisonedsap felt that *making* them was a better option. That's why she tricked Maplefur and Cougarfoot into having her kits. She wanted to have as many as possible to join us in the battle against the clans."

Mistybreeze stared at him, wide eyed. "That must be why Revengeheart wanted me to have kits so badly."

"Exactly." Swiftstalker nodded and turned to Bloodfur, sadness filling his eyes. "I'm so sorry I stopped talking to you. I never wanted to stop being your friend. But Poisonedsap didn't want me anywhere near you." He looked down. "I was afraid she'd kill you or something."

Part of him was relieved to finally know the answer to why Swiftstalker stopped talking to him. But the consequences saddened him. "I had no idea what you were going through. I'm sorry too." He leaned forward and licked his friend's ear. "I forgive you."

"Let's go!" Some cat yowled in the distance, and Bloodfur tensed. *Deserve's cats are headed for the forest!*

"I hate to ruin the moment," Mistybreeze interrupted, sounding uneasy. "But we need to figure out what to do, and fast. Deserve has enough supporters to destroy the clans!"

Bloodfur's mind spun. "The three of us can't stop the army," He meowed. "We need to warn the clans."

"But how?" Mistybreeze stared at him. "We'll never make it on time!"

Swiftstalker rose to his paws. "We have to try," He growled. "I won't let any more cats die because of my mother." He looked around.

"We can take a different route back to the forest. It might be longer, but it's our only shot."

"We can't throw away our shot," Bloodfur murmured. "We have to try as hard as we can to get to fourtrees before Deserve and his cats do."

"Right." Mistybreeze narrowed her eyes. "Let's go."

The three of them raced through the forest as the sun disappeared behind the trees. Bloodfur's paws ached more and more as they ran, his muscles growing more and more weak. But thinking of his clanmates and his family kept him going. *I need to get there on time! We're the only ones who can warn them!*

By the time they reached the forest, the full moon hung high in the sky. Bloodfur staggered, gulping down air. Beside him, Mistybreeze and Swiftstalker were just as exhausted. They'd run for more than half of the way before they were forced to slow to a walk. He was sure that his pads were bleeding from running for so long. He forced his throbbing paws forward, peering over the hill at fourtrees.

No! The gathering has already started! The leaders sat on the great rock, already speaking. Cats of all five clans gathered around, listening. They had no idea what was coming. Mistybreeze crouched beside him, moaning. "We're too late. We'll never get down there on time! Deserve's cats could arrive at any moment!"

Bloodfur narrowed his eyes at the cats below. "No, it's not too late. I have to get down there and warn the leaders, or more innocent cats will die." He turned to his friends. "You two should go send word to the cats in their camps."

Mistybreeze stared at him wide eyed, her fur glowing under the moonlight. "Depthstar told the other clans about you at the last gathering. If they see you, they might kill you on sight."

"I'm willing to take the risk," Bloodfur meowed quietly. "I have to do something right for once. And if they don't let me, at least I'll die trying."

She looked ready to object, but Swiftstalker raised his tail. "Let him." He stared at his old friend. "Good luck, Bloodfur." He turned away. "Mistybreeze, let's go, we need to get to the camps quickly."

The silver she-cat hesitated. "Okay." She licked Bloodfur's cheek. "I love you." Before he could respond, she turned and raced after Swiftstalker toward Shadowclan territory.

Bloodfur stared down at fourtrees, drawing in a deep breath. Here it goes... "StarClan, help me..." He whispered before summoning the strength to race down the slope toward the cats below.

Chapter 30

[image]

His stomach twisted with anxiety as he pushed his way through the crowd, ignoring the cats as they grumbled and hissed at him.

A WindClan cat glared at him. "What's he doing?"

"Is that Bloodfur?" He heard Timberstorm gasp as he brushed past the tom.

Bloodfur leaped onto the great rock near Strawberrystar, who spun and let out a startled hiss. "What in the name of-"

"Cats of all clans-" Before he could continue, Depthstar and Frostedstar sprang at him, pinning him against the stone. He desperately tried to pull free, but the leaders were too strong. *I have to warn them!*

Depthstar glared down at him, fury blazing in his dark eyes. "You have no right to speak, Bloodfur," He spat. "Or even to be here!"

The cats below broke into anxious meowing, some looking at one another in confusion, while others yowled at Bloodfur angrily. "Get that murderer out of here!" A RiverClan warrior screeched.

"Bloodfur?" Flameheart and Bloomfire stared at him in disbelief.

Frostedstar dug his claws into Bloodfur's shoulder."Fourtrees is no place for a traitor!"

"No, you have to listen-" Bloodfur protested, his heart sprinting anxiously. *Deserve's cats could arrive at any moment!*

"I don't want to hear a word you have to say," Depthstar snarled. "Get out of here before I kill you myself."

Bloodfur nodded, but the moment the leaders released him, he shot to the edge of the great rock, yowling loud enough for everyone to

hear him. "Deserve's Army is going to be here at any moment!" He heard the other leaders begin snarling at him, but he ignored them, desperate to warn everyone. "They're attacking here and at your camps! There are traitors in your clans! You have to-"

"Deserve's Army, attack!" A yowl broke out from beyond the trees, and Bloodfur froze, watching in horror as Deserve leaped out of the bushes, followed by a swarm of his cats. The clan cats let out yowls of shock as the soldiers leaped at them. But most of Deserve's soldiers ignored the cats below, running straight for the great rock where the leaders stood.

"No!" Bloodfur snarled as a group of cats sprang onto the rock at the leaders. A black tom lunged for Frostedstar's throat, and Bloodfur leaped in the way, batting the soldier aside with an unsheathed paw just as another pinned Gladestar, swinging her claws at her face. Bloodfur desperately tried to defend the leaders single pawed until a cat slammed into him, and he let out a shriek as he was knocked backwards off the rock.

He braced himself to feel his back meet the hard ground, but before he landed, a cat slid under him, breaking his fall. He quickly rolled off of her and onto his paws, startled when he saw Mistybreeze rising to her paws. "What are you doing here?" He gasped. "You were supposed to warn WindClan!"

"I know," She confessed, looking a little guilty. "But I couldn't leave you to do this alone." She looked around and Bloodfur did too, his stomach twisting as he took in his surroundings. Fourtrees was a place of peace. But tonight, it was a battlefield. Cats screeched and yowled around him, locked in battle with their opponents. He felt a raindrop on his nose and looked up, seeing that clouds had drifted over the moon. It was starting to rain. *StarClan is angry.* He spotted Cobratail swinging at a tabby by the great rock, amber eyes lit with anger. The tabby lunged at the deputy, pinning him against the ground and digging his teeth into his throat.

"Go help WindClan!" Bloodfur yowled over the rain to Mistybreeze before racing to Cobratail's aid, springing at his attacker and knocking him away. He bit into the tabby's shoulder and he screeched, leaping away. He turned to Cobratail anxiously. "Are you

okay?" The deputy was rising to his paws, pressing a black paw to his bleeding throat.

"I'll live." Cobratail stared at him uncertainly. "Why would you save me? After all you've done..."

Bloodfur shook rain from his whiskers. "I could never let my clanmates die." He paused. "Especially not my uncle."

Warmth flashed in the black and red tom's eyes. "I knew they were wrong about you. You have your mother's courage."

"Traitor!" Papercut lunged at them, Crow racing alongside him. They looked furious to see Bloodfur fighting on the wrong side. But he and Cobratail met the soldiers strongly, and Bloodfur found himself matching the deputy's attacks blow for blow. *We really are kin.*

"That's it!" Deserve yowled and Bloodfur spun, alarmed when he saw the army leader standing on the great rock, his dark fur lined silver in the moonlight, pinning Gladestar under him. "Kill them! The time has come for the clans to be defeated!" He lunged down at the WindClan leader, sinking his teeth into her throat until she went still. To Bloodfur's relief, Deserve leaped away from her, lunging at Strawberrystar. *Maybe he doesn't realize she has nine lives! She'll be okay...*

"Ravenfeather?" Frostedstar gasped as his deputy cornered him against the great rock, his soaked fur clinging to his thin frame. "What are you doing?"

The black tom bared his teeth, his amber eyes fixed on the white tom's throat. "Taking what's mine!" He spat.

"What?" The RiverClan leader bristled as thunder crackled above. "I trusted you! You've been my deputy for seasons!"

"Exactly," Ravenfeather snarled. "I'm sick of being your deputy!" He unsheathed his claws. "It's time for me to lead RiverClan. We will unite with Deserve against the other clans, if any remain after tonight!" He lunged at Frostedstar and the two cats screeched

furiously as they fought.

I should help Frostedstar! Bloodfur turned to see that Timberstorm had joined Cobratail in fighting Papercut and Crow. *They'll be okay.* He started toward the RiverClan cats.

"I always knew you'd betray me!"

He spun when he heard Revengeheart's snarl. The white tom was circling Mistybreeze, his tail fluffed up and lashing furiously. "You haven't contributed anything to this plan!" He spat. "I should never have wasted my time on such a pathetic, useless she-cat!"

Mistybreeze glared at him through narrowed eyes. "Get out of my way!" She hissed defiantly. "I have to go to WindClan!"

"The only place you're going is StarClan!" He unsheathed his claws and lunged at her, pinning her and sinking his teeth into her throat. Mistybreeze yowled and pushed on him, but the thin she-cat was no match for him.

"No!" Bloodfur forgot about Frostedstar and barrelled into Revengeheart, digging his teeth into his shoulder and slamming him into the wet earth beside Mistybreeze. The warrior screeched and rolled over, slashing his claws across Bloodfur's muzzle. It stung, but he ignored the pain and pinned Revengeheart's shoulders, baring his teeth. "You piece of fox dung!" He lunged for his throat, but the black legged warrior twisted out of his grip, swinging a hefty paw at Bloodfur's ear. He staggered to the ground, dizzy at the strength of the impact.

Revengeheart stood over Bloodfur, his eyes blazing with anger. His fur was soaked and clinging to his muscular frame, gray and brown with dirt and bits of grass. "You've always been weaker than everyone else!" He snarled. "I was a fool to think you'd help us!"

"You've been a fool to fight with your mother!" Bloodfur spat, shakily regaining his balance. "You're only fighting against us because you think clan cats killed your father! But you know who really did it? Poisonedsap!"

He expected the tom to look surprised, but he only laughed. "You think I don't know that?" He hissed. "I knew a moon beforehand that she was considering killing him! But we didn't tell Swiftstalker because we both knew he was too weak to understand!"

What?! Bloodfur gaped in shock. *He knew!* "Why were you so keen on fighting ThunderClan then?" He yowled. "You killed one of their warriors!" He lunged at him, rolling him to the cold ground.

Revengeheart let out a purr of amusement, swinging a paw at Bloodfur's ear. "Poisonedsap thought to frame ThunderClan by taking the body to the border." His eyes glowed in the darkness. "We needed to kill off as many clan cats as we could for Deserve."

Bloodfur was stunned. "He was your father!"

"He was going to make me weak." Revengeheart grinned, pushing him onto his back. "Cougarfoot made me stronger than that piece of kitten fluff could have. It's a shame your father wasn't like that." He paused. "Oh, I forgot," He laughed. "Your father is dead. He decided he'd rather die than raise you."

He let out a furious hiss and tried to pull free, but his hind paws slipped on the muddy ground. *Fox dung!*

"At least you'll finally get to meet him." He lunged for Bloodfur's throat, but just before his teeth pierced his skin, a black blur slammed into Revengeheart, throwing him off of Bloodfur. He scrambled to his paws, shaking mud and grass from his fur before looking up to see who had saved him. He couldn't think of any black cat he was on good terms with.

To his surprise, Spiderfang was pinning Revengeheart, slashing his claws at his half-brother's face. "I've got him!" The black tom yowled at Bloodfur. "Get to the camp!" He ducked as Revengeheart swung at him. "Make sure the kits are okay!"

Bloodfur didn't have time to think about why Spiderfang was helping him. He just nodded and spun, racing toward ShadowClan territory as rain drenched his fur. *Oh, Starclan, what's going on at the camp?*

***

Swiftstalker let out a yowl of fury as a soldier slashed at his ear, and he pushed the cat away, giving a warning growl before his opponent ran off. His pelt was drenched in rain and he shuddered, glancing around. His body hurt, and he felt wet everywhere. He couldn't tell what was rain and what was blood. But he didn't care. *For the first time in my life, I'm fighting for my clan, just as I always wanted!* He felt stronger than ever before. *I won't let my clanmates suffer any longer because of Poisonedsap!*

He saw no sign of his mother in the camp. He guessed she was in the nursery still. *I hope she's protecting those kits!* A yowl of agony caught his attention, and he turned to see Bonfire crouched over Crowmask, digging his claws deep into the warrior's throat. He let out a cry before going limp, a pool of blood forming beneath him.

Swiftstalker lunged as the black and orange tom let out a yowl of triumph. "You won't kill any more of my clanmates!" He yowled as he rolled the young tom to the ground, slashing at his face.

"What's wrong with you?" Bonfire snarled, looking wildly confused. "You're with us!"

"No!" Swiftstalker hissed. "I'm a warrior of ShadowClan!" He lunged down and bit into his front leg, and Bonfire let out a screech of pain, pulling free and slamming him onto his side, biting into his ribs. Swiftstalker screeched and twisted, kicking the tom in the face. When Bonfire fled, Swiftstalker staggered to his paws, his ribs sore from the attack. He looked around the clearing in dismay. *Oh no..!*

He saw one or two of Deserve's soldiers dead on the ground. But the number of clan cats was greater. Beyond Crowmask's body, Copperstripe lay with a ragged wound in the side of his neck. Ashcloud was limping badly, blood trickling from his stomach. Two soldiers lunged at him, and the gray and white tom vanished under them. Swiftstalker looked past them and froze when he saw Foxshadow slink into the elder's den.

Bluerain went to the gathering, but Buzzardglare is in there! He instantly bolted after Foxshadow, but when he entered the den, he

saw that he was too late. The old tabby lay dead, blood pulsing from his throat. "How could you kill your elder?" Swiftstalker spat, lunging at Foxshadow. The dark furred tom swung at his throat, but Swiftstalker ducked and lashed out, slicing open his muzzle.

"We all knew you were weak," Foxshadow sneered. "We should have killed you a long time ago." He swung, but Swiftstalker was quicker. He slashed his claws across Foxshadow's face, catching his right eye. The warrior let out a screech of agony and hung his head, turning away for a moment. When he looked back at Swiftstalker, his eye was closed, blood running out from between his eyelids and down his face. He backed away, his other eye lit with fear.

"Leave," Swiftstalker spat, shaking blood from his paw. "Or you'll be blind in both eyes."

Foxshadow glared at him for a moment before staggering away, whimpering in pain.

"What's wrong with you? Get out there!" He heard his mother snarl and raced out of the elders den, looking to the nursery. To his disbelief, Poisonedsap was herding her four young kits out of the den. "Go on!" She hissed. "Fight! This is what I've been preparing you for!"

"I don't want to!" Leafkit let out a terrified wail, backing up and hiding between her mother's legs. "I'm scared!"

Gingerkit's green eyes were round with terror as he dug his claws into the ground, but Poisonedsap pushed him forward with an unsheathed paw. "Please, I don't want to hurt anyone!"

Poisonedsap bared her teeth, her eyes blazing with frustration. "You will fight right now!" She yowled. "Go finish Ebonypaw, she'll be easy!"

"No!" Duskkit pressed himself to the ground, and Rowankit huddled against him, wailing.

The queen let out a screech of fury and lunged down at Rowankit, sinking her teeth into her scruff and throwing her across the

clearing.

Swiftstalker bristled in horror as the kit hit the ground headfirst before rolling onto her side. She didn't move. *She killed her! She killed her own kit!* Poisonedsap then turned to Leafkit, sinking her teeth into the kit's neck. *No! She's going to kill them all!* He raced at his mother as she turned to Gingerkit and Duskkit who huddled together, wailing in terror. But Cougarfoot was faster.

"What's wrong with you?" The golden warrior screeched, slamming into his mate and pinning her to the ground. Poisonedsap snarled and slashed her hind claws at his stomach, pulling free and lunging at the warrior.

Swiftstalker shot to Cougarfoot's side, yowling as he pushed his mother onto her side, digging his teeth into her shoulder before she ripped free. The golden she-cat screeched and slashed at her son's face. "You're just as worthless as those kits!"

"Why would you do that?" Duskkit was wailing. "Why would you want to kill us?" Beside him, Gingerkit stared at the bodies of his sisters, eyes wide and stunned.

Poisonedsap snarled and tried to attack them, but Swiftstalker tackled her, digging his claws into his shoulders. "Get the kits out of here!" He yowled at Cougarfoot, but the tom had already grabbed Duskkit by his scruff, lashing his tail at Gingerkit to follow him.

"Come back here with those kits!" Poisonedsap screeched as Cougarfoot ran out the thorn tunnel with his kits.

I'll hold off Poisonedsap. Swiftstalker glared down at his mother, suddenly feeling more hatred for her than ever before. He let out a screech as she swung at him, and they locked into battle.

Chapter 31

[image]

Bloodfur breathed heavily as he ran through the damp forest, his paws skidding in the mud occasionally. It had taken him a while to reach ShadowClan territory. He constantly ran into enemies that he needed to fight through first. This made him more and more worried about sending Mistybreeze alone to WindClan.

I hope she's okay! He thought anxiously. *Maybe Deserve's soldiers aren't there yet...* But he knew that was unlikely. *Mistybreeze is a capable cat. She'll be okay.* His pelt clung to him, wet and sticky in clumps of mud, grass, and rainwater. His body stung in some places, telling him that he was injured. He figured it was nothing too serious if he was able to run, but he wasn't sure how much he was bleeding, if he was. He was so wet, he couldn't tell what was mud, water, or blood.

He crashed through the bushes and let out a startled snarl when he saw Cougarfoot up ahead with his back to him. *He's Poisonedsap's mate. Of course he's on her side!* He unsheathed his claws, preparing to spring at the warrior when he turned his head. Bloodfur was surprised to see that he was carrying Duskkit by his scruff.

The golden brown tom's eyes flashed with surprise and he lowered his head, resting Duskkit on the ground. "Bloodfur! I need your help."

"I'm scared," Gingerkit whimpered and padded out from behind his father, pressing against Duskkit.

"What are you doing with those kits?" Bloodfur demanded uncertainly.

Cougarfoot looked behind him toward the camp uneasily. "I'm taking them somewhere safe," He explained quickly. "The camp is under attack, and... Poisonedsap killed Leafkit and Rowankit."

Bloodfur's eyes widened. He'd known Poisonedsap was a bad cat. But to kill her own kits..! That she-cat was truly heartless.

"I was wrong about Poisonedsap," Cougarfoot meowed, pulling his kits close with one paw. "I was a fool to take her as my mate. Please, help me bring my sons to WindClan."

"WindClan?" Bloodfur blinked at him. "Why-"

"I can't let my kits stay here," Cougarfoot meowed quietly. "The clan will never forgive Poisonedsap for what she's done. They won't see Gingerkit and Duskkit for who they are. They'll see them as Poisonedsap's sons, and I won't let them grow up in a clan that will despise them for their mother's actions." He paused. "They would face the same prejudice every day like you did, Bloodfur. And no cat deserves to deal with that."

He looked at the two kits. *He's right... The clan will be wary of all of her kits. Even Swiftstalker will have trouble earning their trust for a while.*

Cougarfoot looked toward the moor. "In WindClan, no cat will know who their parents are. They'll be safe and treated fairly." He looked at Bloodfur hopefully. "Please, will you help me?"

Before Bloodfur could answer, Poisonedsap leaped out of the bushes behind Cougarfoot, letting out a screech of fury. "You piece of fox dung!" She snarled. "Those weak kits won't see the light of day again!" She lunged at the golden tom, and the kits shrieked in terror as they watched their parents battle.

Bloodfur shot forward, grabbing Gingerkit by his scruff and sweeping Duskkit close with his paw, pulling them away from the fighting warriors.

"I should have killed you!" Poisonedsap spat, slashing her claws across Cougarfoot's shoulder. "You're worth no more than Maplefur was!" Cougarfoot lunged for her throat, but she ducked and clawed at his side.

Bloodfur glanced back at them anxiously as he pushed the kits into

the shelter of a bush. "Stay here, okay?" He turned to help Cougarfoot as the warrior yowled. Poisonedsap had pinned him, digging her front claws into his throat. The warrior struggled as blood pulsed from his wound.

"Get off him!" He yowled, lunging at the she-cat and knocking her away from him. But when he looked at Cougarfoot, he saw that he was already dead. Poisonedsap pushed Bloodfur away and started toward the kits who huddled under the bush together, whimpering.

Bloodfur leaped in front of the kits, baring his teeth. "Leave them alone!"

"Get out of my way, Bloodfur!" The ragged she-cat spat, her pelt tangled in mud and pine needles. "I decide their fate, not you."

"You don't decide their fate," Bloodfur hissed defiantly. "*They* do." *If any cat knows that, it's me...* "If you want those kits, you'll have to get through me first."

Poisonedsap snarled and lunged at him, but a black and white blur intercepted, slamming the she-cat to the muddy ground.

"Swiftstalker!" Bloodfur gasped, starting forward to help his friend.

"I'll deal with her." Swiftstalker slashed his claws at Poisonedsap's shoulder. "Get the kits out of here!"

Bloodfur nodded and turned to the kits, who were trembling in terror. "Duskkit, stay close behind me," He meowed before picking up Gingerkit by his scruff. He turned and raced through the trees toward WindClan territory.

***

Swiftstalker watched Bloodfur run off with his half-brothers. *Good. He'll take them somewhere safe.* He swung his head to Poisonedsap as she swung at him, catching his ear with her claws.

"You were always the weakest one!" Poisonedsap spat angrily as Swiftstalker staggered back, blood trickling from his ear. "You're just like your father!"

"Good," Swiftstalker retorted. "I'd rather die than turn out like you!"

Poisonedsap snarled furiously and lunged at him, sinking her teeth into his shoulder. Swiftstalker yowled in pain and ripped free, slicing at her muzzle before thrusting her onto her side, digging his claws into her body. He was relieved that the rain had stopped. It was harder to move quickly when wet fur was dragging you down. His fur was still damp, but drying, and he was able to move more quickly. Poisonedsap shrieked and twisted her head, biting into his front leg. Swiftstalker pulled free and slashed at her throat.

She scrambled to her paws, coughing up a bit of blood. She glared at Swiftstalker in hatred, her flanks heaving while blood trickled from the wound he'd inflicted in her throat. He hadn't cut deep enough to do critical damage.

"You wouldn't kill your own mother, would you?" Poisonedsap spat blood.

Swiftstalker narrowed his eyes, shaking rain from his eyelids. "You killed my father, and now you've caused the deaths of many other cats. You killed your own kits. You don't deserve to live." He was about to attack her when she lunged at him and pinned him onto his side, digging her claws into his throat. He didn't dare move, terrified that his throat would be torn open if he did.

"It didn't have to be this way, Swiftstalker," Poisonedsap growled. "You could have thrived in Deserve's Army with us. But instead, you'll be dying like a useless clan cat." She raised her paw to slash his throat open. Swiftstalker shut his eyes.

"Poisonedsap!" He opened his eyes to see Deserve stepping out of the bushes, followed by Castiel and Wolf. "What are you doing?"

Poisonedsap glared at the army leader. "Swiftstalker has betrayed us," She spat. "He can't be allowed to live."

The black tom studied her. "He's your son."

"So?" Poisonedsap bristled. "He's a traitor! Just like my other kits who refused to fight."

A growl rumbled in Deserve's throat. "I have no interest in working with a cat who would kill her own kits." He looked away. "Our deal is off."

"What?" She let out a snarl of fury, stepping off of Swiftstalker to face Deserve. "We had an agreement! If I helped you gain allies in the clans, you would take me as your mate and give me a high position in the army!"

Castiel glanced at his father in surprise. "Is that true?"

"Not anymore." Deserve flicked his tail to Cougarfoot. "I've seen how you treat your mates." His emerald eyes narrowed. "Do you think I'm an idiot? I have no interest in letting you even *join* my army."

Poisonedsap let out a screech and launched herself at Deserve. The army leader swung a massive white paw at her head, knocking her to the ground. She fell onto her back, and the tom swung an unsheathed paw at her throat, digging his claws deep into her flesh.

Swiftstalker had to look away as Deserve tore his claws down her body, Poisonedsap's scream of agony almost deafening. When she fell silent, he hesitantly looked to his mother. She lay on her back, her eyes wide and sightless. Blood pulsed from a massive wound stretching from her throat to her stomach. *She's dead... She's finally dead...*

Deserve shook blood from his paw while Wolf turned to Swiftstalker, growling as he approached him. He tensed and unsheathed his claws, ready to defend himself. But before Wolf could attack, Castiel stepped to his side, raising his paw. "Let him live." He meowed, resting his blue eyes on Swiftstalker. "This was never his fight."

Wolf hesitated, glancing back at his leader. "Deserve?"

The black tom slowly nodded. "Right. Let's see how the others are doing at fourtrees." He and his cats turned and disappeared into the trees. The sky was lightening with a purple-pink glow.

The leaders... Swiftstalker's fur bristled. *They were heavily*

outnumbered! His mind spun. *And I should find Bloodfur. He might be in trouble...*

***

It was almost dawn when Bloodfur reached the WindClan camp. He didn't hear any fighting inside and began wondering if Deserve's cats hadn't come here. He set down Gingerkit, breathing heavily. Duskkit sat beside him, looking anxious. "What are we doing here?" He squeaked.

Bloodfur looked down at the brown and caramel kit. "This is your home now," He rasped. "You'll be safe here."

"What do you mean?" Gingerkit squeaked. "What about ShadowClan?"

He didn't respond. *They're only a few moons old.* He thought. *They won't remember any of this. They'll believe that they were born WindClan cats.*

A silver tabby she-cat suddenly raced out of the gorse tunnel, nearly crashing into Bloodfur. She halted and stumbled back, staring at him in bewilderment. "What are you doing here? Are you one of those rogues?" She unsheathed her claws.

"No, I'm not," He assured her. "I'm Bloodfur of ShadowClan." He paused. "Did they attack here?"

The tabby glanced down. "Yes." She meowed quietly. "A lot of our cats were killed. But we took a lot of theirs too and drove out those who survived." She narrowed her eyes. "The clans will not be defeated that easily."

Hope flared in his chest. *Are we winning the battle?*

"Why are those kits with you?" She demanded. "They're too young to be out of the nursery!"

Bloodfur nudged the kits toward her, and she blinked at them. "This is Gingerkit and Duskkit," He meowed. "Their father asked me to take them to WindClan before he died. He hopes you'll take care of

them."

Before the WindClan cat could respond, a familiar she-cat ran to her side. "Willowtail, I-" She broke off, her eyes lighting with relief. "Bloodfur!"

"Mistybreeze!" He touched noses with her, purring. "You made it!"

The silver she-cat stepped back and nodded, purring loudly. "I got here just before the rogues came. They were prepared for the attack."

Bloodfur purred. "I knew you could do it." He looked around. "I wonder how the other clans are..."

"Gladestar hasn't returned," Willowtail meowed uneasily. "Or Monarchwing."

"They must still be at fourtrees," Mistybreeze meowed anxiously. "The other leaders too. We have to help them!"

Bloodfur nodded. "Right." He started turning away, then paused, looking over his shoulder at Willowtail. "So you'll take the kits?"

"Of course," Willowtail meowed, pulling them close. "They'll be safe in WindClan."

He dipped his head, and he and Mistybreeze started racing back toward fourtrees.

***

When they reached fourtrees, Bloodfur was horrified at what he saw. Dozens of motionless cats lay on the ground, the grass stained with blood. Elders... Apprentices... Queens... So many dead cats... The only dead clan cat he recognized was Falconclaw. The tabby lay motionless, blood running from his throat. A lot of Deserve's cats were dead too. Sorrel, Patch, Timber...

Very few cats were still fighting. It looked as though most had left to defend their camps. Frostedstar and Ravenfeather were locked in battle, but both cats looked exhausted, blood running from their

pelts. Strawberrystar was crouched, her tail lashing slowly as she faced two of Deserve's soldiers. Her deputy, Snowfalcon, was at her side, blood running from a cut above his eye. Ravenstar was laying on the great rock, breathing heavily.

Mistybreeze gasped. "Ravenstar is hurt badly." She raced to the great rock to help him. Bloodfur started to follow her, then froze when he saw Gladestar laying motionless in a pool of blood. *She must have been on her last life...*

"How many more lives does he have?" He heard someone exclaim from the other side of the great rock. Bloodfur narrowed his eyes and bolted around the rock toward the voice, horrified at what he saw on the other side.

Depthstar lay on his side motionless, blood running from his throat. Revengeheart and Mottledface stood over him, their paws soaked in blood. *He's dead!* The ShadowClan leader suddenly gasped in air, his eyes snapping open. The bleeding in his throat stopped. Revengeheart snarled and lunged down at him, sinking his teeth into the leader's throat while Mottledface watched, his tail twitching impatiently.

They're killing him over and over until he runs out of lives! Bloodfur yowled and lunged at Revengeheart, slamming him to the ground. The tom glared at him, eyes blazing with anger. "You!" He swung a black paw at Bloodfur's ear. "Stop getting in my way!" He lunged at Bloodfur and wrestled him to the ground, sinking his teeth into his neck. Bloodfur pulled free, feeling blood wet his neck before he grabbed Revengeheart's tail with his claws, pinning it to the ground. The tom screeched and hit the earth with a thud, and Bloodfur pinned him, digging his teeth and claws into his throat. *This cat has to die!*

Claws grasped his pelt, and Bloodfur snarled as Mottledface dragged him away from Revengeheart and pushed his neck to the ground, baring his teeth. "You're an idiot, Bloodfur!" He spat. "How could you betray us for those fleabags?"

"Those fleabags are my clanmates!" Bloodfur snarled, trying to push Mottledface off him, but the tom pinned him back against the

ground, digging his claws into his neck. "And I'll fight to the death for them!"

Revengeheart stalked toward him, his tail lashing. "It's a shame you won't be fighting at all." He slashed his claws at Bloodfur's face while Mottledface held him down. He shrieked in pain and tried to pull free, but couldn't. Revengeheart lashed a paw at him again, and Bloodfur shut his eyes before he was blinded, but he had still slashed open his face. Pain seared his cheek, but Revengeheart sliced his claws across his throat before he could recover. The warrior continued slashing at Bloodfur until he collapsed under Mottledface, trembling as blood ran through his fur. *I'm going to die.* He thought. *Revengeheart is going to finish me off soon...* He moaned and closed his eyes.

"Bloodfur!"

Swiftstalker? He opened his eyes and saw his friend lunge at Revengeheart, pushing him away from Bloodfur. Revengeheart let out a furious snarl, slashing his claws at his brother's face. "I'm not surprised you'd betray us!" He sneered. "You were always the weakest of our group!"

"You were a fool to think I was on your side!" Swiftstalker bowled his brother over, slashing at his chest. "I'm not cruel like you!"

Mottledface dug his claws into Bloodfur, who grunted in pain as he rolled over, swinging a paw at him. He caught the tom's muzzle but did little damage. He was exhausted and sore.

"I'll take care of him!" Suddenly, Mistybreeze sprang onto Mottledface, hissing as she knocked him away from Bloodfur, who staggered to his paws, turning to look at Swiftstalker.

The two brothers were locked furiously in battle, snarling and biting at each other, tufts of fur flying onto the grass. After a moment they sprang apart, and Swiftstalker breathed heavily, glaring at Revengeheart. "I'm sorry, brother." He lashed out with a black forepaw, slashing his claws across the tom's throat.

Revengeheart let out a screech that died into a choking sound,

blood dripping from the wound in his throat. He choked up blood and staggered forward, his dazed amber eyes fixed on Swiftstalker. He grunted and collapsed.

"Revengeheart?" Mottledface bristled, staring at his friend in shock. Mistybreeze took the opportunity to slash at his ears.

"You'd better go before I tear you apart," She hissed, arching her back. The mottled tom glared at her before fleeing.

"You did it," Bloodfur breathed heavily as Swiftstalker stumbled toward him. "You killed him."

The black and white tom trembled as he sniffed Bloodfur's pelt. "Are you okay?" He rasped.

He nodded, glancing back at the blood soaking his pelt. "Yeah," He let out a dry purr. "A great time to be called Bloodfur, eh?"

Swiftstalker chuckled before staggering, his eyes glazing over as he fell onto his side.

"Swift-" Bloodfur let out a gasp when he saw blood pulsing from a wound in Swiftstalker's stomach. "Oh no!" He forced himself to his paws and crouched by his friend's side, pressing his paws to the wound. "No, Swiftstalker! You'll be okay!"

Mistybreeze hung her head, staring at them sadly.

"It's okay." The black and tom let out a soft sigh. "Do you think they'll let me join StarClan?" He murmured.

Bloodfur stared at his friend numbly. "Of course they will." He rasped, his heart throbbing. "If they don't, I'll follow them around throwing moss balls at their heads."

Swiftstalker let out a weak purr of amusement, his blue eyes shining at Bloodfur. "I'm sorry I was such a bad friend to you..." He coughed up blood. "I left you when... When you n-needed me most."

His heart tore in two. He rested his chin on Swiftstalker's shoulder. "You were the greatest friend I could have asked for," He whispered,

swallowing a lump in his throat. "I'll miss you so much..."

"I'll be with you," The black and white tom murmured, his eyes slowly closing. "I...I prom..." He trailed off. Bloodfur waited for him to finish, but he never did. He pressed his head against Swiftstalker's shoulder, letting out a cry of grief. Mistybreeze quietly crouched beside him, resting her tail around Bloodfur.

"I'm sorry," She murmured. "He was a great friend."

He was more than great. Bloodfur thought. *He was my best friend....* He heard several cats race into the clearing, yowling and snarling.

"Retreat!" Deserve's voice rose above the rest. "Retreat!"

"The battle is won." He heard Frostedstar yowl from the great rock. "Deserve's Army has been beaten!"

Chapter 32

[image]

A pale morning light beamed from behind heavy clouds drifting across the sky. The forest was very quiet. The silence was broken only occasionally when birds chattered briefly in the trees. Bloodfur slowly emerged from the thorn tunnel, Mistybreeze at his side. They carried Swiftstalker's body between them on their backs.

His heart ached as they padded to the center of the camp and carefully lowered Swiftstalker to the ground. He pressed his muzzle against his black fur for a moment before raising his head. Bloodfur had expected the clan to confront him the moment he set paw in the camp. But no cat seemed to notice him. They were all too lost in grief.

Greenpine and Timberstorm were crouched over Ashcloud's body, their eyes closed and ears flat. Beyond them, Boost rested his chin over Copperstripe's shoulder. Blood stained the tabby's pelt. Coldpebble pressed his muzzle against Crowmask's flank. Mistybreeze let out a cry of grief when she saw her father's body. She left Bloodfur's side to join her brother, pressing her pelt against his.

"Bloodfur!" Bloomfire's cry caught his attention and he spun, ready to apologize to her for everything he'd done. But when he faced her, his heart skipped a beat.

She stared at him, her eyes round and anxious. She sat close to her kits, who were huddled around something, their heads low and ears flat. He saw Creamheart beyond Heatstorm and Foxflower, staring numbly at the cat she was trying to save.

No... No, please don't let it be... Bloodfur's heart pounded as he shot across the clearing to them, and Bloomfire stepped back to let him in the circle, closing her eyes. Flameheart lay in the grass on his side, his flanks rising and falling rapidly. Blood ran from a deep wound in the side of his stomach. Creamheart had pressed cobwebs

over the wound, but blood continued soaking through and dripping onto the ground.

"Bloodfur..?" Flameheart rasped, his green eyes flickering open.

"I'm here." Bloodfur's voice caught in his throat. He crouched beside the tabby, his heart throbbing. Heatstorm growled faintly at Bloodfur, but he ignored it. "I'm so sorry!"

Flameheart stared up at him with exhausted eyes as he breathed quickly. "You came to warn us..." He murmured. "I hoped you would come back... I-I was afraid I wouldn't see you again."

He twitched his ear I'm surprise. "You wanted to see me again?" He rasped. "After everything I did?"

"Of course," The ginger tabby murmured. "I've known since the day you were born... that you were not the cat Hawkfeather thought you were. You have always had a good heart." He gazed at Bloodfur. "I'm s-sorry we lied to you. It's my fault you went down the wrong path."

"No, it's not!" Bloodfur protested. "I shouldn't have been so angry." He rested his chin on Flameheart's shoulder, swallowing a lump in his throat. "You did what you thought was best for me, and you were right. I had the best parents I could have asked for."

He felt his foster-father purr under him before he jerked and coughed. Bloodfur moved his head back from his shoulder and saw blood running heavier from his wound. He pressed a paw to his pale underbelly, looking to Creamheart anxiously. "He needs more cobwebs!"

The cream and brown she-cat looked down, shaking her head. "It's too late," She murmured. "I'm sorry."

Bloomfire and her kits did not react to this news, and Bloodfur understood that they had already known. It was why she had called him over. To see Flameheart one last time. He choked out a cry of grief and pressed his muzzle against the tom's cheek fur. "Thank you," He croaked. "You raised me as your own and loved me so that

I wouldn't feel abandoned. You were the greatest father." He licked Flameheart's ear. "I wish I'd really been your son."

A purr rumbled in Flameheart's throat. "To me, you've always been my son." He murmured. "And you always will be..." He looked at his real kits. "I'm proud of all of you."

"Flameheart," Bloomfire whimpered and curled around her mate, resting her head over his. Bloodfur stood and stepped back as Foxflower, Applefall, and Heatstorm crouched to share tongues with their father for the last time.

His green eyes drifted across the cats around him. "I love you all... Take care of each other." After a moment he sighed, letting his last breath escape from his lungs. Bloodfur hung his head, his heart heavy with grief. *He's gone... My father is gone...* He closed his eyes and leaned against Bloomfire, who curled her tail around him. The family grieved quietly together for a long moment.

"Bloodfur."

He jumped a little when he heard Creamheart's voice by his side. She was sniffing his shoulder. "You're hurt badly," She meowed. "Let me treat you."

Bloodfur nodded, feeling blind as he let the medicine cat guide him to her den. *Flameheart is dead... Swiftstalker is dead... I've lost so much today...* When he slumped into a nest of moss in the medicine den, pain shot up his shoulder, and he realized how injured he was. Everything happening around him had made him too busy to feel the pain. He saw Depthstar laying asleep in a nest beside him, cobwebs plastered to his throat.

"Great StarClan, I can't even tell where you're hurt," Creamheart exclaimed as she dabbed cobwebs at his pelt. "You're covered in blood!"

He moaned and rested his chin on his paws, closing his eyes. He was exhausted. Between his injuries, fighting in the battle, and the race against time to get to fourtrees, it had been a long, hard night. He felt his mind try to drift into sleep.

"You fought hard for us," The medicine cat meowed suddenly. "Didn't you?" Bloodfur gave a tiny nod, too sore and exhausted to speak. "I'll make sure Depthstar knows it." The she-cat meowed quietly. "He was wrong to-" Creamheart's voice drowned out as he drifted into darkness, letting sleep overcome him.

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When Bloodfur awoke again, his fur was warm against his body. His pads were no longer sore, and he felt no pain anywhere. *Wow.* He thought, keeping his eyes closed. *Creamheart must have given me a lot of poppy seeds...* He curled into a ball, letting out a soft purr of comfort.

"Bloodfur."

He froze, his ears pricking forward when he heard her voice. He snapped open his eyes and leaped to his paws. "Poppy-" He broke off, amazed at what he saw before him.

I'm in Starclan! His mother, Poppywing, stood before him, her red tabby pelt sparkling with stars. Her eyes shone at him proudly. Many more cats stood behind her, watching Bloodfur. *Brownstripe, Rosebreeze, Diamondrain... Crowmask... Swiftstalker!* He froze when he saw his friend sitting tall, his blue eyes shining with starlight. Maplefur sat beside his son, his creamy fur glowing. Cougarfoot sat with his tail wrapped around his two tiny daughters, Leafkit and Rowankit. *Flameheart!* Bloodfur's heart ached when he saw his foster father. Beside him, another cat stepped forward, gazing at Bloodfur with bright green eyes.

"Cardinalpaw!" His voice cracked, his heart swelling with emotion when he saw his young kin. He bounded toward the red tabby, touching noses with him.

The starlit apprentice purred. "Hello, Bloodfur."

"I'm so sorry!" He blurted out, his heart burning with guilt. "I never wanted you to die! Or Creamheart! I-"

Cardinalpaw dipped his head. "I know," He meowed. "I forgive you.

Besides, it wasn't your decision. It was the path StarClan laid out for me."

Bloodfur stared at him. "What-"

"My son," Poppywing meowed, and he turned to her, his yellow eyes wide. "I'm so proud of you." She stepped forward to stand in front of him. "You have fulfilled the prophecy."

"What?" He stared at her, his mind spinning with confusion. "What do you mean? How?"

Poppywing tilted her head. "I told you, A darkness is growing. A poison that will spread and destroy your clan from within."

"And it nearly did." Maplefur stepped to the she-cat's side, his yellow eyes resting on Bloodfur. "Poisonedsap was recruiting cats from within ShadowClan to participate in she and Deserve's plot to destroy the clans.

"Not to mention, having kits and raising them to be like her." Swiftstalker twitched his tail. "Her poison was spreading."

Bloodfur nodded slowly, his mind clearing with understanding. "Of course..!" He paused, staring at the StarClan warriors. "But what did you mean, 'Only the spilling of blood will save ShadowClan?' Whose blood was it?"

Poppywing dipped her head. "The blood was referring to you, Bloodfur. You needed to be spilt from the clan. And Cardinalpaw's death was necessary in order for the clan to finally exile you."

"And Revengeheart guided you to that point," Maplefur added.

Bloodfur gaped. "Why would you want me to be exiled?"

"You went to Deserve's Army, where we needed you to be," Maplefur explained. "You would never have known when they were attacking if you'd stayed in ShadowClan. You wouldn't have returned to warn the clans."

He blinked. "But I barely had a chance to warn them before

Deserve's soldiers arrived! Would it have made that big a difference if I wasn't there? Swiftstalker and Mistybreeze would have warned the clans."

"No." Swiftstalker stepped forward. "Me and Mistybreeze had a lot of doubts about whether or not we would be able to do something about the attack." He dipped his head to his friend. "You gave us the strength to try. We would never have warned ShadowClan and WindClan without you."

I guess that makes sense... Bloodfur thought.

Poppywing's eyes clouded. "However... You broke the warrior code severely in the process, and caused the deaths of many cats... Like *they* have." Her eyes drifted aside, and Bloodfur followed her gaze, his fur prickling.

Just beyond them stood the border between StarClan and the dark forest. Twisted, gnarly trees stretched from the dead grass on the other side, a foul looking mist drifting through the dead forest. He saw cats moving across the border into the dark forest and froze when he recognized some. Revengeheart and Poisonedsap padded alongside each other, their pelts bloody and scarred. Falconclaw followed, his tail lashing. Beyond them, two ghostly black cats ran into the forest, and he recognized them as Blackstorm and Ravenfeather. *They'll spend all of eternity in the place of no stars...*

Bloodfur noticed the way the StarClan cats were looking at him and tensed, his fur prickling. "A-am I going to go there one day?" He stammered anxiously. "For all I've done?" Several cats exchanged uncertain looks, and his stomach twisted.

"He killed Cardinalpaw and Silverberry," Crowmask commented. "Not to mention attempted to kill Creamheart."

Flameheart glared at the black tom. "He was influenced by Revengeheart," He growled. "He was driven by grief and betrayal!"

Maplefur twitched his ear. "Isn't that how most dark forest cats are made?"

They're really considering putting me there! Bloodfur's stomach churned with anxiety as he listened to the StarClan cats debate about his afterlife. *And maybe I do deserve to be there, but... But I'm not like any of those cats! Not anymore!*

"Don't forget it was your prophecy that put him in this position." Swiftstalker pointed out, lashing his tail. "Me and Cougarfoot made mistakes too. If we're here, surely Bloodfur deserves to walk with us?"

"Wait," Bloodfur interrupted, staring at the starlit warriors uneasily. "I know I've made a lot of mistakes. I've done a lot of terrible things, and for that I'm so sorry. But I never wanted to hurt any cat. I have more regrets than you can imagine, and they might haunt me for the rest of my life." He lowered his head. "You don't have to forgive me, and if I'm destined to walk the dark forest, I understand. But I promise I will spend the rest of my life as a loyal ShadowClan warrior. I'll defend my clan with my life, and never break the warrior code again."

The StarClan warriors didn't respond for a moment, as though they were considering Bloodfur's words. Just when he thought StarClan would not forgive him, Poppywing spoke. "Thank you, Bloodfur." She dipped her head. "I promise that one day you will walk with us in StarClan."

Bloodfur let out a long sigh of relief. "Thank you!" *I'm going to join StarClan one day! They've forgiven me!*

His mother purred and stepped forward, resting her chin on his head. After a moment, she stepped back. "There's someone who would like to meet you."

Who? He wondered just as a gray tabby padded to Poppywing's side, his yellow eyes hesitant. "Bloodfur," The tom dipped his head. "I wish we'd met sooner."

Bloodfur stared at the tabby. "Who are you?"

"My name is Rainheart," The tom meowed, and echoed Bloodfur's thoughts when he added. "I'm your father."

Rainheart! My real father... He stared at the warrior for a moment, unsure of what to say. "Why did you leave me?" He rasped.

Guilt lit the gray tabby's eyes. "I loved your mother too much to live without her," He murmured, lowering his head. "But I realize now that it was horrible of me to make my son an orphan." He glanced aside at Poppywing. "We are no longer mates in StarClan. She has refused to forgive me." He looked back at Bloodfur. "I only hope that *you* can. There are no words strong enough to express how sorry I am for abandoning you... For giving you that horrible name that has caused you pain since you were a kit." Poppywing twitched her tail, her blue eyes narrowed at her former mate.

"I'm proud of the cat you've become," Rainheart meowed, his yellow eyes filled with emotion as he gazed at Bloodfur. "I wish I'd been there for you. But I was young and stupid." He looked over his shoulder at Flameheart. "I can't thank Flameheart enough for raising you as well as he did. Better than I could have."

Bloodfur followed Rainheart's gaze to the tom who had raised him. *Rainheart may share my blood, but I will never think of him as my father... Flameheart is my father. He always will be, and he always has been...*

"If any cat knows about being young and stupid, it's me," Bloodfur murmured. "We all make mistakes. I forgive you, Rainheart."

The tom's eyes lit with relief. "Thank you." He hesitantly stepped forward, touching his nose to Bloodfur's. "I'll watch over you always." Bloodfur closed his eyes, a purr rumbling in his throat.

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"Will he survive?"

"Yes. He's just exhausted."

Bloodfur slowly blinked open his eyes, finding himself back in the medicine den. Creamheart was standing close to him, pressing cobwebs to Depthstar's throat. The ShadowClan leader lay in a nest beside Bloodfur, his dark eyes fixed on him.

"Depthstar," He croaked, starting to stand. *There's so much I have to say!*

"No." The dark blue tom twitched his tail. "I will speak first."

Bloodfur sat down in his nest, staring at the tom nervously. *Will he tell me to leave? I'm supposed to be exiled...*

"I lost a lot of lives today," Depthstar murmured, looking exhausted. "And I would have lost more if you hadn't saved my life. Thank you."

He was surprised that Depthstar wasn't angry with him. "O-of course." He dipped his head. "I couldn't let them kill you." He paused. "Listen, I'm so sorry about-"

"You don't have to say anything." The ShadowClan leader interrupted. "I saw you with StarClan just now."

Bloodfur's pelt prickled in surprise. "You did?"

"Yes," Depthstar nodded. "I only woke up a few moments ago." His blue eyes clouded with sadness. "I didn't realize how much you were struggling with. I was wrong about you. We all were. I'm so sorry for how ShadowClan has treated you. Can you possibly forgive me?"

"Of course." Bloodfur murmured, dipping his head. "You were only afraid for your clan."

The leader shook his head. "It was wrong of me to judge you before you even left the nursery. You tried to warn us about Deserve and fought for us in the battle." He dipped his head. "I'm proud to call you one of my warriors."

He's letting me back into the clan! Bloodfur's heart quickened with joy. "Thank you, Depthstar." He bowed his head. "I will not let you down ever again."

Depthstar hesitated. "You understand it'll take some time for you to earn the clan's trust again?"

"Of course." He nodded. "I'll do whatever it takes."

"Good." Depthstar's eyes warmed. "I know just how you can start. Ebonypaw is in need of a new mentor. Once her injuries have healed, you can train her."

Depthstar is already trusting me with an apprentice! Bloodfur purred. "I'll make her the best warrior in ShadowClan."

"Depthstar?" He was surprised when Frostedstar appeared at the mouth of the den.

The ShadowClan leader blinked, clearly just as surprised to see the RiverClan leader. "Frostedstar?"He grunted as he pulled himself to his paws, nearly collapsing, but Bloodfur rushed to his side to support him. He let Depthstar lean against him as they left the den. The RiverClan leader was not alone. Strawberrystar, Ravenstar, and Monarchwing stood behind him, looking solemn.

"We've been stopping by every clan to see how they are," Ravenstar meowed. His black fur was parted with fresh scratches. "This was a very bad battle. SkyClan has lost many warriors tonight."

"And ThunderClan," Strawberrystar added quietly.

Monarchwing's amber eyes blazed with grief. "Gladestar did not survive the battle. I will go to the moonstone tonight to receive my nine lives."

"The dead aren't the only cats we've lost," Depthstar meowed quietly. "Some of our warriors turned on us." He looked around the clearing. "Mottledface, Foxshadow, and Amberrose never returned, and their bodies were not found. I take it they've joined Deserve's Army."

Strawberrystar's ear twitched. "Battalon never returned to camp."

"Neither did Tornadowind," Monarchwing meowed.

Frostedstar's ice blue eyes narrowed. "We all had traitors," He murmured. "I never imagined I would have to kill my own deputy."

Depthstar dipped his head. "We've lost so much tonight," He murmured. "It will not be easy to move on. But the clans will recover. We always have."

Bloodfur let his gaze drift across the clearing where many cats still grieved. He saw Spiderfang crouched over Falconclaw's body, and he remembered how the young warrior had saved him from Revengeheart earlier in the battle.

I wonder why he decided to switch sides? Bloodfur glanced back at Depthstar to make sure he could stand without him, then padded away. "Spiderfang," He called. The black and gray warrior glanced at him and sat up.

"Thanks for saving me in the battle," Bloodfur studied him. "Why did you do it? You were on Deserve's side."

Spiderfang looked down at his brother's body. "After I saw Deserve kill Blackstorm, it made me realize how horrible those cats were," He meowed quietly. "I don't know what I was thinking. My mother just made the army sound so great, but..." He shook his head. "I don't want to be like that."

"Bloodfur,"

He turned to see Coldpebble, Greenpine, and Timberstorm approaching him. He grew uneasy. Were they going to confront him for returning to camp?

"We saw you fighting in the battle with us," Greenpine meowed. "Thank you."

Timberstorm nodded. "I can't believe you tried to warn us about the attack, after all we did to you..." His eyes grew solemn. "We were wrong to judge you just because of Hawkfeather's interpretations. I'm so sorry."

Bloodfur was surprised that they were apologizing to him. He hadn't expected the clan to warm up to him for a while. "I-it's okay..." His heart warmed with belonging. "Thank you. I'm sorry too."

"Don't think we've all accepted you." Cliffshade stepped to

Greenpine's side, narrowing his eyes. "I'll be sure to keep an eye on you, traitor."

"Right." Heatstorm stepped to the warrior's side. "You killed my brother. The rest of my family may forgive you, but I won't so easily."

As the warriors moved away, Mistybreeze joined Bloodfur, her blue eyes lit with disbelief. "I can't believe those idiots!" She exclaimed. "After all you did today, how can they not trust you?"

"It's okay," Bloodfur meowed, feeling surprisingly content. "I'll prove myself to them. They'll see the cat I really am, one day." He turned his gaze to Mistybreeze, feeling warm. "But if they don't, I have enough cats who do."

Mistybreeze purred and leaned against him as she rubbed her muzzle against his shoulder. A purr rumbled loudly in Bloodfur's throat.

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Bloodfur raced through the forest in pursuit of a frog. It felt fantastic to be back in ShadowClan. Two days had passed since the battle, and he was spending as much time as he could hunting and patrolling for his clan to make up for all the wrong he'd done.

This frog is for Mistybreeze. He thought. When the creature paused near a tree trunk, he pounced, grasping the frog in his claws just as it leaped. He pinned it and swiftly delivered the killing bite. He straightened, looking at his catch with a rush of satisfaction.

"Nice catch."

He nearly jumped out of his fur at Castiel's voice. He spun to see the silver tabby sitting beside a tree, watching him. "What are you doing here?" Bloodfur unsheathed his claws. "Get off my territory!"

"Calm down." Castiel twitched his tail. "I have a message from my father. Your clanmates Stripednose and Song will be staying with us for a while."

Bloodfur bristled. "You can't keep them prisoner for that long!"

Castiel shook his head. "It's not like that. Song is very close to giving birth. Deserve doesn't want her travelling until after the kits are born."

Bloodfur slowly nodded. He decided to believe this. He'd seen how much Deserve still cared for his sister. He didn't believe that the army leader would harm her or the kits. He eyed Castiel warily, growing uneasy. *I'm alone...* He kept his claws unsheathed, preparing to defend himself if the soldier decided to attack.

The tabby seemed to know what Bloodfur was thinking. "I'm not going to kill you. I respect you too much." He paused, his voice hardening. "Deserve's Army is not finished with the clans yet. We may have lost this battle, but I can assure you it won't be the last."

Bloodfur narrowed his eyes. "The clans will be ready for you." He growled. "*I* will be ready for you."

Castiel's eyes gleamed. "I admire your loyalty." With that, the tom spun and ran off, disappearing into the forest.

Loyalty... I've made so many mistakes. Bloodfur thought, staring after Castiel. *But I've learned so much. There are so many cats who love me...There will be some cats who doubt my loyalty, but I'll never stop trying to prove them wrong. I will be patient with them. Even if they never trust me, I will defend every one of my clanmates with my life.*

Final Allegiances + Family Tree

Shadowclan

Leader: Depthstar - Very dark blue-gray tom with a lighter front left paw, dark blue eyes.

Deputy: Cobratail - Mottled dark red and black tabby tom with amber eyes.

Medicine Cat: Creamheart - Brown and cream tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

Warriors

Cliffshade - Dark brown and gray tom with a white underbelly, yellow eyes.

Greenpine - Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Bloomfire - Orange she-cat with white paws, muzzle, and chin, dark ginger ears.

Timberstorm - Dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Boost - Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. Former loner.

Bloodfur- Dark reddish brown tabby tom with a nick in his right ear, yellow eyes.

Apprentice, Ebonypaw

Mistybreeze - Silver-gray she-cat with darker points, light blue eyes.

Coldpebble - Dark gray tom with darker points, dark blue eyes.

Tinylark - Small brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes.

Honeyrose - Golden-red and cream tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Spiderfang - Black and dark gray tom with dark amber eyes.

Heatstorm - Dark ginger and white tom with yellow eyes.

Foxflower - Orange and white she-cat with black legs and ears, a fluffy white tipped tail, green eyes.

Applefall - Yellow tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Apprentices

Ebonypaw - Dark brown tabby she-cat with green eyes.

Thunderclan

Leader: Strawberrystar - Speckled reddish-ginger and cream she-cat with amber eyes.

Deputy: Snowfalcon - Broad shouldered white tom with amber eyes.

Medicine Cat: Spicewhisker - Small black tom with a white muzzle, tail tip, and front right paw, yellow eyes.

Warriors

Broadwing - Broad shouldered dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Oaktuft - Brown and cream tabby tom with amber eyes.

Morningmist - Light gray tabby she-cat with light blue eyes.

Chillwhisker - Light gray tabby tom with light blue eyes.

Cedarnose - Dark brown tabby tom with a white splashed muzzle and paws, amber eyes.

Vanillafern - Creamy colored tabby she-cat with pale yellow eyes.

Darkoak- Very dark brown tom with swirled black stripes, amber eyes.

Windclan

Leader: Monarchstar - Orange she-cat with black spots and ear tips, golden yellow muzzle, chin, nose blaze, chest, and tail tip, darker orange paws, yellowish green eyes.

Deputy: ???

Medicine Cat: Dewstorm - Spotted gray tom with yellow eyes.

Warriors

Firetail - Orange tom with a darker reddish tail and ears, amber eyes.

Jaggedear - Brown tabby tom with a torn left ear, green eyes.

Driftrunner - Dark golden brown tom with very thick black classic tabby stripes, muzzle, chin, ears, paws, chest, and underbelly, amber eyes.

Willowtail- Light gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes.

Whitehare - White tom with light green eyes.

Kits

Gingerkit - Ginger and white tom with green eyes.

Duskkit- Brown and caramel colored tom with black tufted ears, amber eyes.

Riverclan

Leader: Frostedstar - White tom with pale blue eyes.

Deputy: ???

Medicine Cat: Sagefern - Silver and black tabby she-cat with pale blue-green eyes.

Warriors

Frozenripple - Long furred silver tom with swirled white stripes, pale blue eyes.

Lemonsplash - White tom with yellow patches, yellow eyes.

Pebblestep - Mottled gray tom with white paws, pale green eyes.

Petalfin - Silver, black, dark gray, and white splashed she-cat with blue eyes.

Skyclan

Leader: Ravenstar - Long furred black tom with green eyes.

Deputy: Sandblaze - Light golden yellow tom with light brown-ginger paws, mark on chest, ears, chin, and yellowish blaze on forehead and tail tip. Yellow eyes.

Medicine Cat: Ryeheart - Brown tabby tom with dark brown tabby legs, tail, ears, and nose blaze, creamy chin, muzzle, chest, and tail tip, amber eyes.

Warriors

Tigerleap - Dark golden brown tabby tom with amber eyes.

Brackenleaf - Dark ginger tabby tom with amber eyes.

Deserve's Army

Leader: Deserve - Black tom with white paws, emerald green eyes.

Healers

Shimmer - Silver spotted tabby she-cat, pale amber eyes.

Coco - Dark brown tabby she-cat, green eyes.

Soldiers

Castiel - Silver tabby tom with light blue eyes.

Crow - Black tom with a white front left paw, amber eyes.

Papercut - Thin white tom with a scar down the center of his face, pale yellow eyes.

Wolf - Very thick furred dark brown-gray tom with a white muzzle, yellow eyes.

Bonfire - Fiery ginger tom with black patches, amber eyes.

Sunset - Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes.

Coke - Black tom with dark gray spotted legs, dark blue eyes.

Screech - Black tom with amber eyes.

Foxshadow - Black and very dark ginger tom with a bushy tail, dark amber eye. Missing one eye.

Amberrose- Orange and gold she-cat with amber eyes.

Battalon - Smoky black tom with gray-brown muzzle and underbelly, amber eyes.

Tornadowind - Dark gray tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Stripednose - Tortoiseshell tom with white paws, chest, and

muzzle, black mark on his nose, blue eyes.

Queens

Ivy - Dark brown tabby she-cat with white patches, green eyes. Mother to Wolf's kits:

Talon - Dark gray-brown tom, yellow eyes.

Snowflake - silver she-cat with white spots, pale blue eyes.

Misty - Dark gray tabby she-cat, pale green eyes.

Song - White she-cat with light blue eyes. Expecting Stripednose's kits.

[image]

SOB on Redbubble

Shadows of Blood merchandise is now available on Redbubble! Feel free to check it out and support the story and characters. Any purchases would be greatly appreciated! In all honesty, I made these mostly for myself because I love my OCs, but if anyone else is interested in buying something, I'd be grateful! It means a lot that others can enjoy my characters and story.

There are a lot of fun things available and more on the way, but I'm pretty focused on making more stickers right now because stickers are fun. Below are a few things you can get and sticker designs.

https://www.redbubble.com/people/dawnmist/collections/873011-shadows-of-blood?asc=u

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Shadows of Blood on Twitter

I've created a Twitter account for Shadows of Blood, Beyond the River, and any other OC fanfictions I'll write in the future. Feel free to follow it for news, art, updates, and other fun stuff! You can also ask any questions you may have!

https://twitter.com/ShadowsofBlood